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Changing Eyes: American Culture and the Photographic Image, 1918-1941.

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**Changing eyes: American culture and the photographic image,
1918-1941**

McEuen, Melissa A., Ph.D.

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1991

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CHANGING EYES:
AMERICAN CULTURE AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE,
1918-1941

A Dissertation

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
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of History

by

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B.A. magna cum laude, Georgetown College, 1983

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May 1991

FOR MY FAMILY

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After spending thousands of hours in a small room, I completed what I had considered a solitary struggle with words and pictures and ideas. However, when I looked back at the whole experience (which began several years ago), I realized it had been not at all a lone effort, but one made possible by the encouragement and help of many people. I welcome the opportunity, finally, to thank them.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	vi
Photograph Credits.....	vii
Abstract.....	viii
Introduction.....	xi
PART I. INDIVIDUAL POWER AND SURVIVAL OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT	
One. VIEWS FROM THE UPPER EAST SIDE.....	1
AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS.....	60
Two. VIEWS FROM THE LOWER EAST SIDE.....	70
AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS.....	123
PART II. THE DICTATES OF FORM: INFLUENCE OF THE EXTERNAL	
Three. <u>INDUSTRIE VIVANTE</u> : A PHOTOGRAPHIC MISSION.....	136
AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS.....	195
Four. FROM OLD TO NEW: TRANSATLANTIC REBIRTH.	207
AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS.....	253
PART III. "NOT I BUT WE": COLLECTIVE STRENGTH AS CULTURAL IDEAL	
Five. TO GIVE THE PEOPLE THEIR DUE: STRIKING A BALANCE.....	265
AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS.....	342
Epilogue.....	352
A Bibliographical Note.....	355
Bibliography.....	359
Appendix: Using Photographs as Historical Evidence.	377
Vita.....	383
Approval Sheets.....	384

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

Photographs by Doris Ulmann.....	61-69
Courtesy, University of Oregon Berea College	
Photographs by Dorothea Lange.....	124-135
Courtesy, The Oakland Museum Library of Congress	
Photographs by Margaret Bourke-White.....	196-206
Courtesy, Margaret Bourke-White Estate George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University Time-Life, Inc.	
Photographs by Berenice Abbott.....	254-264
Courtesy, Museum of the City of New York	
Photographs by Marion Post Wolcott.....	343-351
Courtesy, Library of Congress	

ABSTRACT

From 1918 to 1941, fast-paced changes and far-reaching crises occurred in all realms of American life -- social, economic, political, cultural, and intellectual. Evidence of the culture's preoccupations showed up not only in written, but also in visual sources. Photographs helped to reveal the values of American culture, and did so with increasing frequency as the photographic process was further improved. Each visual image bore the marks of its culture, yet none provided a completely objective look at reality. For every picture was the product of the personality standing behind the camera.

This study examines both the lives and the photographs of five women who took pictures in the 1920s and 1930s. These five -- Doris Ulmann, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Berenice Abbott, and Marion Post Wolcott -- were selected for several reasons: each made considerable contributions to photography's development, in a historical sense; each produced perceptive works reflecting American thought and life in these decades; and each displayed a unique style, indicative of type and amount of artistic training, political background, varying financial constraints, and sources of support, some private and some public. Together, the five produced a corps of visual images that epitomized the nature of American culture and character in two decades marked by tremendous changes in all realms. Their work covers as broad a spectrum in tastes,

methods, and visions, as any in the history of photography. That these women worked during such a critical time in the nation's history simply augments their personal achievements.

In using photographs as historical evidence, I have examined photographic series of particular subjects, rather than isolated images. I have discussed various sources of funding photographers relied upon, and I have analyzed the extent to which these sources influenced the kinds of photographs that resulted. The main line of argument throughout the study deals with how methods and directions of photography itself changed in these two decades; how these five women I have studied served as both vehicles for, and creators of, change; and how Americans, both collectively, and as individuals, were portrayed through the medium of photography.

Photographs have the kind of authority over
imagination to-day which the printed word
had yesterday, and the spoken word before that.
They seem utterly real.

Walter Lippmann,
PUBLIC OPINION (1922)

INTRODUCTION

The first doctoral dissertation to examine photography and its connection to society was submitted in 1948 to a committee at the Sorbonne. Gisèle Freund, its author, opened her first chapter by noting, "Each moment in history has its own form of artistic expression, one that reflects the political climate, the intellectual concerns, and the taste of the period."¹ Freund argued that the evolution of photography closely mirrored the society in which it functioned, particularly as technological progress began to dominate all facets of the early twentieth-century world. Photography, as a mechanical process, benefitted from numerous technological advances made in the first decades of the century. Smaller cameras, faster films, wire services, and mass reproduction devices were all available by the mid-1930s. The union of mechanical operation and the artistic eye made photography unique, as it combined both science and art, yet was wholly neither. The combination prompted years of argument between disciples of the respective camps. But the visual image went beyond the mere struggle over its definition to serve as a measure of the culture from which it stemmed.

From 1918 to 1941, the years between the world wars for

¹Gisèle Freund published her dissertation under the title, Photographie et Société (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974); translation, Photography and Society (Boston: David R. Godine, 1980).

America, fast-paced changes and far-reaching crises occurred in all realms of domestic life -- social, economic, political, cultural, and intellectual. Even though most Americans had turned away from activities abroad, they had begun to examine themselves and their nation as constituents of a postwar world, one that appeared considerably smaller and more closely-connected than the prewar world had been. Evidence of the culture's preoccupations showed up not only in written, but also in visual sources. Photographs helped to reveal the values of American culture, and they did so with increasing frequency as the photographic process was further improved. But since each visual image bore the marks of its culture, none provided a completely objective look at reality. For every picture was the product of the personality standing behind the camera, the world view according to one specific photographer. The question remained as to whether human contribution outweighed a machine's role in producing a photograph. As Halla Beloff observed:

The camera and the film link a photograph concretely with a machine, and yet we understand that a human intelligence, and sensitivity, and a human need have made us that picture.²

Beloff's description could easily have been applied to other technical processes that developed in the teens and twenties. Mechanical devices, in assuming an increasingly

²Halla Beloff, Camera Culture (New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1985), 75.

prominent role in daily life, posed a challenge to human intelligence and ingenuity.

Photography, then, appeared to be a hybrid, a vocation that required neither comprehensive mechanical expertise nor an acute artistic eye but some mixture of the two. As a low-ranking profession in the early twentieth century, photography seemed an acceptable undertaking for those who might need help from science in order to produce art. No group benefitted more from this notion than women. The Western world had recognized very few women as great painters or sculptors, but it could accept a profession for women where the mechanical instrument, rather than the human hand, accomplished a good deal of the work (and so could be given the credit).³ Women were able to easily pursue photography as a hobby or a career because the profession was not steeped in tradition, as were the fields of law, medicine, and academia. Successful careers in photography did not depend upon attendance at august institutions, where women were rarely admitted, if at all. And as photographic equipment became less bulky and more inexpensive in the early twentieth century, an individual who wanted to experiment with photography needed little capital. Many women were able to borrow cameras and other equipment from friends or relatives or established photographers. In addition, the profession provided an attractive alternative

³See Anne Noggle's introductory remarks in Women of Photography: An Historical Survey, ed. Noggle and Margery Mann (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1975), n.p.

to the narrowly-defined boundaries of nineteenth-century domestic existence. Beloff points out that photography allowed an "individual working alone...[to] achieve something."⁴ Exhibit curator Paul Katz has written that photography opened doors for women, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s:

They wanted careers -- public lives that would be more like a marriage with the world. Photography offered that possibility. In their quest they were aided by the vast increase in photographically illustrated publications and the creation, as a result, of new fields such as photo-journalism and advertising photography. The needs of editors tended to override sexual prejudices, and the relatively low status of the profession as an art form made it easier for women to enter.⁵

Women photographers, then, were the norm rather than the exception. Many who worked in the twenties and thirties, including the five examined in this study -- Doris Ulmann, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Berenice Abbott, and Marion Post Wolcott -- received recognition as equals, even superiors, to their male colleagues and competitors. Katz argues that "the sheer number of women who found a vocation in photography proclaims a social revolution.... as emblematic of the age as the feats of Amelia Earhart and Gertrude Ederle....⁶ Representative

⁴Beloff, Camera Culture, 61.

⁵Edwynn Houk Gallery, "Vintage Photographs by Women of the 20s and 30s," exhibition catalog for March 11 to April 30, 1988, show, introduction by Paul Katz, 5.

⁶Ibid.

photographs of the interwar years -- the pictures that reflected American culture, its tastes and its values -- were taken as often by women as by men. In 1988 Edwynn Houk, owner of the Houk Gallery in Chicago, set out to arrange a photography exhibit that would display a solid cross-section of twenties and thirties pictures. Nearly all of the pictures selected happened to be taken by women photographers. Houk found the results intriguing and concluded, "Without attempting to focus on women artists, the Gallery nevertheless came to represent the works of many women by offering the best and most significant images produced in photography during the twenties and thirties."⁷

In this study I have examined both the lives and the photographs of five women who took pictures in the 1920s and 1930s. In dealing with photographs as historical evidence I have followed what is still a relatively new method in the field: I have examined photographic series of particular subjects, rather than isolated images containing little surrounding information. I have discussed various sources of funding photographers relied upon, and I have analyzed the extent to which these sources influenced the kinds of photographs that resulted. For example, photographs produced by several New Deal agencies are often lumped together in the category labelled "government photography", yet the objectives and results of the Farm Security

⁷Edwynn Houk, remarks in "Vintage Photographs."

Administration (for which Marion Post worked) were very different from those of the WPA Photography Units (where Berenice Abbott served as a supervisor). I have also focussed on a crucial period in the development, reception, and usage of visual imagery. Although the decade of the 1930s saw a proliferation of photographs for public consumption, to detach this decade from its predecessor leads to misconceptions about thirties' photography. To separate the 1920s from the 1930s, as several scholars have done, distorts the existing culture. The main line of argument throughout the study deals with how methods and directions of photography itself changed in these two decades; how these five women I have studied served as both vehicles for, and creators of, change. and how Americans, both collectively, and as individuals, were portrayed through the medium of photography.

I had several reasons for selecting these five individuals -- Doris Ulmann, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Berenice Abbott, and Marion Post -- for study: each made considerable contributions to photography's development, in a historical sense; each produced perceptive works reflecting American thought and life in these decades; and each displayed a unique style, indicative of type and amount of artistic training, political background, varying financial constraints, and sources of support, some private and some public. Together, the five produced a corps of visual images that epitomized the nature of American culture

and character in two decades marked by tremendous changes in all realms. Their work covers as broad a spectrum in tastes, methods, and visions, as any in the history of photography. That these women worked during such a critical time in the nation's history simply augments their personal achievements.

Doris Ulmann's work in Appalachia reflects the hope of many Americans that an isolated group of Anglo-Saxon descendents, supposedly untouched by immigration and industrialization (and therefore defilement and corruption), had remained pure, a nostalgic reminder of a more innocent nation. Dorothea Lange's reputation was built on portraying human dignity achieved through individual strength and perseverance, a stance developed early in her career and not as a result of the popular trend toward social consciousness, as some scholars have argued. Margaret Bourke-White attracted the world with her worship of industry and mechanization. She sank her teeth and invested her talents into the business world, the realm of profit, while the country struggled to survive economic devastation. Fascinated by her environment, Berenice Abbott roamed the streets of New York City in the 1930s, and sought out American culture by studying the myriad facets that comprised a vibrant external world. Young Marion Post, a product of a newer generation, revealed the potential power of group strength -- that inspired by the family, the community, or the masses.

All five women were born in the United States, and each spent important formative years in places that had great impact, among them urban America, the Midwest, California, Europe, and Russia. Their backgrounds in photography varied: Ulmann, Lange, and Abbott all began as portrait photographers during the heyday of portraiture -- the 1920s, Bourke-White preferred science photography in her early years, and Post worked as a newspaper photographer. Ulmann was the only one of the five never to have worried about money. Personal wealth sustained her career and her expensive habits. Lange saw members of her immediate family go in different directions when the Depression began, Abbott took on a variety of odd jobs to support her career, and Bourke-White had outstanding accounts at nearly every major department store in New York City. Post once admitted having said "yes" to any man who asked her out so that she could have at least one good free meal that day. The lives and individual experiences of these women reveal why they chose particular subjects for their cameras, how they reached their artistic goals, and what they believed photography as a medium could accomplish in the United States.

If any common thread ran through their motives, it would highlight each woman's determination to take pictures that would be looked at by people, rather than analyzed by some well-meaning scholar. This study provides an analysis of individual lives, backgrounds, inspirations, failures,

successes, and the place of each within the larger American culture. The photographs, however, speak for themselves, without dissection or embellishment. As pictures that emerged during a crucial period in the development, reception, and usage of visual imagery, they are ultimately tied to their creators' intentions. Photo critic Alan Sekula has pointed out that "every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message."⁸ Such messages cannot be fully understood if the photographer is omitted from the study. Recent scholarship on American photography has shown the importance of going back to the source of an image -- its creator.⁹

More than anything else, this is a study of American culture as seen through five very different pairs of eyes. Mine, perhaps, may be added as the sixth. They are not exclusively women's eyes, but human eyes. Photography scholar Anne Noggle has persuasively argued that a unique women's vision does not exist -- "Women see like people. Their work is recognizable within the framework of the imagery of their own time."¹⁰ Gender, without doubt,

⁸Alan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," Artforum 13 (January 1975): 37.

⁹See especially the revisionist work of James Curtis, Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), and Alan Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs: Images As History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

¹⁰Noggle, Women of Photography, n.p. For an opposing, and much less convincing, viewpoint, see The Woman's Eye, ed. Anne Tucker (New York: Alfred Knopf,

figures into the larger scheme, but it serves as merely one facet among the many which determine an individual's distinctive vision. The fruits of those visions -- the images that emerged in the years between the World Wars -- showed, among other things, an America boasting of its strength, illuminating its individual heroes, grappling with economic ruin, and seeking a collective identity. The impact of dominant cultural forces combined with the strength of personal experiences wielded a powerful influence upon the photographers who hoped to capture brief moments of reality on a glass plate or a piece of film. The visual images they left for succeeding generations to contemplate provide a rich representation of the intricate workings of American culture in the 1920s and 1930s.

1973).

VIEWS FROM THE UPPER EAST SIDE

One picture...cannot express an individual

Doris Ulmann

A few weeks before her sudden and untimely death Doris Ulmann wrote, "Personally, I think there is always more value in doing one thing thoroughly and as well as possible than in spreading over a large area and getting just a little of many things."¹ Though she was born into an extremely wealthy family and married well, little is known of Doris Ulmann's early life. Biographical collections even disagree over her birthdate.² Whether 1882 or 1884, the correct year matters little when one realizes she produced in just a few years a voluminous life's work. Ulmann lived only half a century, all of it in New York City. Her

¹Doris Ulmann to Allen Eaton, 9 July 1934, quoted in David Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 66.

²Michael Held et al., eds., Contemporary Photographers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 774; Turner Browne, Macmillan Biographical Encyclopedia of Photographic Artists and Innovators (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 630; Margery Mann and Anne Noggle, eds., Women of Photography: An Historical Survey (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1975), n.p. Though Contemporary Photographers lists 29 May 1882 as Ulmann's birthdate, all other sources consulted agree upon 1884 as Ulmann's birth year.

numerous forays into the American South and Appalachian mountains took her out of the city temporarily, but it was the urban environment that pressed her to pursue such projects. Born, educated, married, divorced and inspired in the nation's largest city, Ulmann resided in its heart, Manhattan.

The young girl with distinctive cheekbones and piercing, dark eyes attended public schools in New York. A travelling companion to her widowed father, Ulmann supplemented her classroom education with excursions abroad. As a teenager she entered the Ethical Culture School, no doubt impressed by its ideals. A progressive institution, the school appealed to successful immigrants seeking to Americanize their children. The philosophies espoused by the school's founders and teachers reflected their serious concerns for a young generation stepping into a new century. Ulmann enrolled there in 1900. She studied under a young champion of the swelling, working-class population, Lewis Hine. Hine was not yet famous when Ulmann met him in 1900, but before the decade's end, he had published both words and pictures addressing society's problems.³ Hine emphasized

³Lewis Hine, "Charity on a Business Basis," The World Today 13 (December 1907), 1254-1260; "What Bad Housing Means to Pittsburgh," Charities and the Commons 19 (March 7, 1908), 1683-1698; "Industrial Training for Deaf Mutes," Craftsman 13 (January 1908), 400-408; "Our Untrained Citizens--Photographs by Lewis W. Hine for the NCLC," The Survey 23 (October 2, 1909), 21-35; "Toilers of the Tenements," McClure's 35 (July 1910), 231-240. This represents a fraction of Hine's work in

the plight of young children forced to work in factories, mines, and sweatshops. He used his camera to alert an oblivious public to the growing dangers in American cities, due in part to the living and working conditions of the poorer classes. Focussing on the expanding immigrant population, Hine realized the importance of treating these new and unfamiliar faces as individuals. He impressed similar notions upon his students, and Ulmann absorbed a vital principle she would employ much later in her own work. She, like Hine, framed the aesthetic beauty of individual lives, each of which revealed years of hard work and unrealized dreams yet projected an attractive quality of endurance. During the four years Ulmann spent at the Ethical Culture School, Hine was developing his vision of photography as a means of achieving social reform. His ideas echoed those of the widely-read "muckrakers," who used words to accomplish similar ends. Each hoped to induce change for the better.⁴ But across town, Alfred Stieglitz had initiated a movement that sought to keep the camera from

those years. Alan Trachtenberg provides a substantial Hine bibliography in America and Lewis Hine: Photographs 1904-1940 (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, Inc., 1977).

⁴Two of the best known muckrakers were Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair. Sinclair caused a significant uproar over the meat industry's practices with his 1906 publication, The Jungle. Steffens' popular series on urban corruption began running in 1902 in McClure's magazine. These essays were eventually published under the title The Shame of the Cities (1904).

becoming such an instrument. Stieglitz believed photography should be considered an art and nothing more, an end in itself.⁵ Years later Ulmann was forced to reconcile the opposing philosophies, but as a college student she directed her attention to subjects other than photography.

Her special attraction to psychology, a relatively-new social science, led Ulmann to pursue a teaching career. She attended Teachers College of Columbia University.⁶ While at Columbia, Ulmann also studied law, but a quickly-developed distaste for the field convinced her to abandon it after one term. She felt that "a welter of legal technicalities" smothered the human element.⁷ The subjects Ulmann tackled enhanced rather than diminished her intense love of photographing people.

⁵Estelle Jussim, "The Tyranny of the Pictorial": American Photojournalism from 1880 to 1920," in Marianne Fulton, ed., Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1988), 54. In this essay Jussim notes the coincidence, "Muckraking journalism was firmly established in the very year--1902--that Alfred Stieglitz, as champion of fine art photography, was planning the first issue of Camera Work..." Also, Alan Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989). Trachtenberg's discussion of the two photographers, aptly titled "Camera Work/Social Work," shows they were more closely aligned than has been believed. He notes that Stieglitz was "critical of business to the point of cynicism, but more attached to aesthetic, individualistic alternatives than to social or political solutions [as Hine was]." p. 167.

⁶Alfred Heilpern, "Vita," The Call Number 19 (Spring 1958): 12. Also, Contemporary Photographers, 774.

⁷Dale Warren, "Doris Ulmann: Photographer-in-Waiting," Bookman 72 (October 1930): 142.

In 1914 Ulmann began studying photography at Teachers College with the highly-acclaimed instructor Clarence H. White. As "one of White's most devoted pupils" Ulmann continued to work with the master, who later asked her to teach at his photography school. Photographer Laura Gilpin remembered "a quiet Doris Ulmann who sat in on a [Clarence White] class she herself was attending in 1916."⁸ Here Ulmann's personal and professional lives crossed. Clarence White was a patient of orthopedic surgeon Charles Jaeger, the man Ulmann eventually married.⁹ It is not known whether Ulmann first met White, then was introduced to Jaeger, or if her future husband introduced her to the photographer. Regardless, Ulmann's interest in making pictures arose not long before she became Mrs. Doris U. Jaeger in 1915.¹⁰ She undertook photography first as a hobby, maybe at the suggestion of Jaeger, himself a photography buff. She used it as "an excuse for doing something with her hands when her mind was tired."¹¹ Husband and wife shared the interest and

⁸The Darkness and the Light: Photographs by Doris Ulmann, preface by William Clift, with "A New Heaven and A New Earth," by Robert Coles (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, Inc., 1974), 8-9. Also, Allen H. Eaton, "The Doris Ulmann Photograph Collection," The Call Number 19 (Spring 1958): 10.

⁹Clift, The Darkness and the Light, 8-9.

¹⁰Throughout the chapter, she will be referred to as Doris Ulmann, since she used the name professionally.

¹¹Warren, "Photographer-in-Waiting," 142.

soon became active leaders in the Stieglitz-inspired association, the Pictorial Photographers of America.

The pictorialist group would be the only photography collective Ulmann ever joined. She avoided camera clubs, unions, and similar groups, even though she lived in a city that boasted the most exciting photographic community in the country, perhaps the world. But Ulmann chose to work alone, especially in the early years. David Featherstone, author of the most comprehensive Ulmann biography, notes that most of Ulmann's friends and acquaintances worked in fields other than photography.¹² She knew many in medicine, because of her husband's work. But her fascination with the literary mind turned Ulmann's attention to writers, editors, and poets. Ulmann once said, "The faces of the men and women in the street are probably just as interesting as literary faces, but my particular human angle leads me to the men and women who write."¹³ The photographer had experimented earlier with still lifes and street scenes, but by 1918 she had turned her camera toward faces. Portraiture intrigued her.¹⁴

¹²Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits, 24. The bulk of Featherstone's book is devoted to Ulmann photography, though he provides an insightful biographical essay.

¹³Warren, "Photographer-in-Waiting," 139.

¹⁴B21; P7683, B61; P8059-8068, B64, Proof Books, Ulmann Archive, Special Collections, University of Oregon Library (hereafter cited as Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon).

As she engaged in her new craft, Ulmann brought to her work the influence of three powerful forces in photography - Lewis Hine, Clarence H. White, and the Stieglitz pictorialists. Drawing from each, she molded an artistic philosophy that revealed itself in the thousands of photographs she composed. From Hine she developed a love and respect for the unknown individual, the person society more often judged by ethnic, religious, or economic affiliations rather than personal merits. Ulmann eschewed evaluation according to the group standard, though she did find certain groups more fascinating to photograph than others. In her struggle to recognize the individual life, Ulmann often sought out particular "types" that could be easily categorized. As a student and friend of Clarence White's, Ulmann drew ideas from the Photo-Secession movement, which suggested one had to be an artist in order to create art with a camera. Even in the seemingly adversarial viewpoint of the Stieglitz group, Ulmann found portions of the artistic philosophy she could assimilate into her own. The softness and beauty comprising the early pictorialists' romantic imagery also pervaded Ulmann's photographs.¹⁵ Although a few interpreters have suggested

¹⁵Stieglitz, the father of pictorial photography in America, chose to alter his style as the popularity of Impressionism and tonal qualities faded. He abandoned the characteristic blurred image for sharper, more geometrical features. See Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs. 180-184.

that Ulmann provided "raw sociological data", her photos reveal an artistry that transcends straight science.¹⁶ She employed light to its fullest effect, sought figured shadows, focussed on patterns, objects, hands, and faces. Ulmann combined the best features of art and of science. And she was painstakingly thorough.

Ulmann believed she needed an understanding of the person before she captured him or her on film, so observation of a subject's mannerisms and gestures preceded any Ulmann "sitting." In Dale Warren's 1930 essay for Bookman, he described Ulmann's handling of a portrait session. The photographer's subject could expect cocktails and cakes and cigarettes, but not solely for his own enjoyment:

...Ulmann would say these things are offered to 'draw you out.' She studies your hands as you pass her a plate of cakes, observes which leg you cross over the other, notices the expression of your eyes, tells you a funny story to make you laugh, and another not so funny to see if you are easily reduced to tears.¹⁷

Ulmann believed this method produced truer results than any prefigured posed position she could arrange. There was no one chair or one backdrop or one angle she preferred.

¹⁶Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits, 31-35. Featherstone argues that Ulmann was strictly a recorder, since she collected data but did not intend to use it for higher purposes.

¹⁷Warren, "Photographer-in-Waiting," 131.

She left those choices to her subject. In her early years as a photographer, Ulmann allowed her sitters -- the literary figures, the politicians -- to select their poses. But later, particularly on the Appalachian journeys, Ulmann arranged a good number of her subjects. She seemed to assume that the mountain folks' simplicity and integrity could not be marred by positioning, whereas the magazine editors, well-known authors, and respected surgeons needed to be left alone. This silent encouragement allowed them to shed the false facades they created and sustained for the outside world. No doubt Ulmann's experience as a wealthy, city socialite helped her to realize how misleading a carefully-constructed shell could be. In her 1925 publication, A Portrait Gallery of American Editors, Ulmann provided thoughtful justification for her work. In the preface she noted:

Personality and character are often so illusive, so intangible that they defy and escape the most seductive efforts of reproduction and instead of rendering a living likeness, little more than an anatomical copy is made.¹⁸

The photographer hoped her images of these men and women exceeded such limited dimensions, providing insight and lending definition to their influential existence. She questioned the extensive power various editors wielded over

¹⁸Doris Ulmann, A Portrait Gallery of American Editors. Being A Group of XLIII Likenesses, introduction by Louis Evan Shipman (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1925), v.

public thought. The proliferation of new magazines meant increased circulation of their opinions. Exposure to these ideas often suggested acceptance of them. Ulmann believed her portraits would enable the American public to examine more closely the sources of their thinking. While reverent, Ulmann also harbored a skepticism toward this group of writers and the periodicals they produced. She trusted the visual image, the magic of her camera, to go beyond the printed word. She prefaced her portrait book with a diplomatic, yet sharp, statement about journals and the men who made them:

Magazines are so great a part of our daily life that almost unbeknown to us they mould our opinions and colour our views on most of the great problems of the day. Insidiously they have become a part of us and often times the views we hold as our own have in truth been formed by the editors of our favorite magazines. It is but natural that we should care to know what manner of men are these, who have thus formulated our ideas, coloured our thoughts and directed our perception of humour.¹⁹

Ulmann hoped her photographs would achieve more than simple, flat resemblances of her subjects. She wanted to reveal personalities. The photographer attempted, then, to capture each subject in a state as natural and comfortable as possible. Ulmann abhorred artificial light and, if more light were needed, she directed her sitter toward an open window. The authors Ulmann photographed chose from among a

¹⁹Ibid.

limited collection of props she kept in her Park Avenue apartment. A fountain pen, pads of writing paper, various sizes and types of books, satisfied most. But exceptions kept Ulmann and her household staff busy. Robert Frost, who never worked at a table, requested a wooden writing board. E. V. Lucas, the prolific British essayist, refused a fountain pen and demanded instead a pen and ink well. Ulmann, ever patient and extremely gracious, allowed her subjects to direct the day's events if they so desired.²⁰ But others who felt more uncomfortable about the portrait process gave the photographer free reign. Ulmann recalled a memorable session at Sherwood Anderson's Virginia home. Of the trip and of Anderson himself, she noted:

I arrived at ten o'clock in the morning and did not leave until after midnight. Certainly no photographer could ask for a more interesting subject than Mr. Anderson, nor could anyone have put himself more completely in my power. He even led me to his clothes closet and asked me to look over his suits and choose the one I wanted him to wear.²¹

Ulmann's desire to capture true images of literary figures points to her own love of literature. She revelled in language, read the German classics aloud, and, according

²⁰Warren, "Photographer-in-Waiting," 131-132.

²¹Ibid., 136.

to a friend, spoke "flawless" English.²² Ulmann had grown up in an era when people relied upon words -- for information, but also for entertainment. Late nineteenth-century America was a word culture. Ulmann's exposure to new educational trends, to advances in technology, even photography, helped her realize that the written culture was undergoing transformation in the twentieth century. As the theory stressing experience as the best source of knowledge grew more popular, reliance on the written word waned. The genteel literature of the 1800s gave way to a more realistic and stinging portrayal of American life. An avid reader, Ulmann must have sensed the slow deterioration of the written culture she had known as a girl. Ulmann's personal transformation came about when she decided to take her artistic talents seriously. She created her own new world when she opened her apartment doors to a host of exciting American authors. If the word culture appeared to be slipping, with a dubious literary replacement close behind, Ulmann wanted to observe the men and women creating the stir. In the same year the war ended, Ulmann began taking photographic portraits. She launched her career along with many new voices of the twentieth century. Perhaps she believed, as did Gertrude Stein, that the twentieth century had just begun, and she certainly did not intend to miss out

²²The Appalachian Photographs of Doris Ulmann, remembrance by John Jacob Niles, preface by Jonathan Williams (Highlands, N.C.: The Jargon Society, 1971), n.p.

on its excitement.²³ The authors Ulmann entertained as sitters ranged from the irreverent essayist H. L. Mencken, to the quick-witted critic Dorothy Parker, to the insightful poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. If Ulmann agreed or disagreed with the myriad ideas generated by her numerous subjects, she never revealed it. Appearing tolerant of multifarious opinions, Ulmann selected sitters who represented appropriate, if dissenting, voices of the 1920s.²⁴ Sherwood Anderson, harsh critic of the American Midwest, illuminated the barren nature of a society driven by industrialization. He bemoaned the loss of romantic beauty and easy pace, two accompaniments to a pre-industrial lifestyle.²⁵ The portraits Ulmann composed of Anderson show a relaxed, comfortable man, with a thoughtful look on his tanned face.²⁶ An Anderson counterpart in criticizing the middle class was Sinclair Lewis, who published Main Street in 1920 and Babbitt two years later. The man who molded George F.

²³Stein is noted for having said, "After the war we had the twentieth century." See Frederick J. Hoffmann, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade, rev. ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 220.

²⁴B71b, P570; B73, P1042, 1043; B70b, P202, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. A wide range of personalities were Ulmann subjects, including John Dewey, Dorothy Dix, Carl Van Doren, Albert Einstein, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Helen Keller, Louis Shipman, Thomas Wolfe, and William Butler Yeats. See B70b, 71b, 74, 75, 78, 79, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

²⁵Anderson's disillusionment is best evident in Perhaps Women (1931) and Winesburg, Ohio (1919).

²⁶See the cover of Call Number 19 (Spring 1958).

Babbitt, the two-sided figure of simultaneous self-doubt and self-assurance, appears much the same before the camera as his fictional creation did before the Zenith Boosters' Club. Lewis displayed a forced, insincere expression, daring anyone to discover what lay beneath the surface.²⁷

Ulmann's keen powers of observation helped her understand her subjects, but in many cases the photographer had read the author's works, slipping into his or her mind through that channel. Never requesting payment for her work, Ulmann sought compensation, if at all, in other ways. She preferred to receive a copy of the writer's latest book or a signature inside her own personal edition.²⁸ No bills or order forms or contract agreements exist among Ulmann's few notes and papers. She considered herself an artist, not a commissioned employee. She refused to assume the role of court painter who made every subject appear beautiful or brilliant. People who came to Ulmann to be photographed frequently did so at her request, rather than their own. Her friend Olive Campbell noted that Ulmann "rarely took a photograph unless interested in the sitter."²⁹ But Ulmann did not take pictures solely for her own pleasure, as her painstaking darkroom practices reveal. She created images

²⁷P2026, B79, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

²⁸Warren, "Photographer-in-Waiting," 144.

²⁹Olive D. Campbell, "Doris Ulmann," Mountain Life and Work, October 1934, 11.

of writers so they might see and understand themselves better, a reason for which many took up the pen in the first place. Ulmann got the privilege of studying the masters of words, those reflecting upon, and at the same time, molding American culture.

Though Ulmann's true love of literary minds led her to photograph numerous writers, her first two published collections of portraits were of medical school faculty members. As Mrs. Charles Jaeger, Doris Ulmann gained entrance into the prestigious circle of physicians at Columbia University. Within months of taking her photography hobby seriously, she had her first collection published, a handsome portfolio entitled Twenty-Four Portraits of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University (1918). In the years immediately following, Ulmann's reputation as an outstanding portraitist soared. In 1922 her second major work to be sponsored by a university, entitled A Book of Portraits of the Medical Faculty of Johns Hopkins University, was published in Baltimore.

Ulmann's respective collections of physicians and editors, though assemblages of portraiture, suggest an aspect of her personal work ethic that exists in all her photography. Ulmann possessed a strong desire to assume and complete whole projects focussed toward particular ends. In Featherstone's biography he maintains that Ulmann's "need to

complete a group of pictures for a specific purpose... suggests the documentary intent of her work."³⁰ Even for one portrait sitting, a study of a single individual, Ulmann exposed a tremendous number of negatives. She recognized the complexity of human existence, realizing that too few shots would simplify and ultimately distort a life. She believed one photograph could not define a person, and so offered her sitters "twenty or thirty finished prints instead of the scant dozen or so proofs submitted by the craftiest of commercial photographers."³¹

Ulmann augmented her drive to embrace complete projects by carrying out each step of the photographic process. She handled the glass plates, mixed the chemicals, developed the negatives, made the prints, and mounted the finished photographs. Ulmann preferred to keep her creative secrets to herself, allowing no one to assist or interrupt the magical process that unfolded in her darkroom, a converted bathroom.³² She even refused to allow other eyes to view her proofs:

I see my finished print in the proof... but I cannot expect others to see anything beyond what the proof presents. I avoid retouching, but prints always require spotting before they are ready. I believe that I become better acquainted

³⁰Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits, 19.

³¹Warren, "Photographer-in-Waiting," 144.

³²Only years later, after Ulmann began to suffer ill health, did she allow anyone to assist her in the darkroom.

with my sitter while working at the pictures, because the various steps provide ample time for the most minute inspection and contemplation.³³

Ulmann's vision of what she accomplished with her artistry and technique raises some questions regarding her place in the history of photography. Chronologically, she falls between two great documentary forces, the Progressives, best represented by Lewis Hine, and the Farm Security Administration photographers of the 1930s. Since both of these movements sought to arouse the public's attention to social ills, they used the camera as a tool. The resulting pictures, by promoting action, stood in the middle as one step in a process. Ulmann, as a "portrait" maker, believed her job was finished once her subject received his prints. She considered the medical faculty publications a favor to her husband's colleagues, since she never cared whether or not her photographs were reproduced.³⁴ This notion runs counter to the intentions documentary photographers expressed about invoking change. (insert Hine quote from "Social Photography" on child labor) Ulmann, a steadfast devotee of the Pictorialist Movement, obviously considered herself an artist first, photographer second. But Ulmann's career took a turn after her first trips south. She then realized her work could

³³Warren, "Photographer-in-Waiting," 142.

³⁴Ibid., 144.

reach beyond its status as mere art. In 1930 she told Allen Eaton, with whom she later collaborated on a book:

I am of course glad to have people interested in my pictures as examples of the art of photography, but my great wish is that these human records shall serve some social purpose.³⁵

Exposure to the Gullah Negroes of South Carolina and the mountain folk of Kentucky and North Carolina left Ulmann to ponder why she took pictures. She hoped to give something back to the Appalachian communities and schools she photographed, which raises a question -- Were Ulmann's images documentary photographs?

Since the term "documentary," amorphous at best, represents different things to its various interpreters, the task of labelling Ulmann's work remains difficult. Jonathan Williams claims that Ulmann carried out the "great realist tradition" since her photographs bore an "earthy, yet savory" tone.³⁶ Featherstone declares Ulmann an "ethnographer," noting that she simply collected data.³⁷ Indeed Ulmann provided a vast body of scenes and faces never before captured on film. Her subjects, those tucked away in remote valleys far from modern civilization, seemed appropriate ones to "document." If considered a separate

³⁵Eaton, "Doris Ulmann Photograph Collection," 10.

³⁶Appalachian Photographs of Doris Ulmann, n.p.

³⁷Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits, 32.

genre, documentary photography frequently hosts subjects that are considered ordinary, common, often anonymous. Yet, to define the genre solely on the basis of who shows up in the pictures violates its purpose. Documentary captures moments, not just people. Imposed boundaries with four corners surround a piece of time impressed on paper. These aspects of a photograph require consideration, as do the methods employed by the photographer. The extent of compositional arrangement, the elapsed time between shots, even the complexity of technical equipment need to be examined.

Ulmann's decision to take her cameras out of her apartment studio coincided with the end of her ten-year marriage to Charles Jaeger. She took her first trip into the Appalachian mountains in the mid-twenties, around the same time she began signing her prints "Doris Ulmann" instead of "Doris U. Jaeger."³⁸ As early as 1924, Ulmann started using her maiden name on prints she entered in local exhibitions. She offered a portrait of a black man for the Kodak Park Camera Club's Fourth Annual Exhibition in 1924.

³⁸Signed, dated prints of Ulmann's early work may be found in the Doris Ulmann Collection, Print Room, New York Historical Society, New York City, and in the Ulmann Archive, Special Collections, University of Oregon. In the NYHS collection, Box I includes portraits of an Indian (or someone dressed in chieftain regalia) that are signed "Doris Jaeger" and dated 1916. Among the platinum prints at the University of Oregon are portraits signed not only by the photographer but also by the sitter. Ulmann most commonly wrote "Doris U. Jaeger" on her early prints.

Another exhibition entry, a picturesque landscape she entitled "III Clouds over the Mountain," reveals Ulmann's new professional name, along with her impressive address -- 1000 Park Avenue, New York City.³⁹ Ulmann chose to erase the original signature on some of her previous work, replacing it with the name she had reclaimed.⁴⁰ So as the photographer dropped the Jaeger name and forfeited her position as a doctor's wife, she guided her career down a fresh path. The confining walls of the studio and the strolls around Columbia University's campus gave way to miles of dirt roads and hikes toward mountain villages.

Although Ulmann pursued a new mission in photography and assumed a new career name, she still clung to her old equipment. She could personally afford any kind of new camera or accessory, but she most frequently used a 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 inch whole-plate camera positioned on a tripod.⁴¹ Even in her travels on foot across creekbeds and to out-of-

39P59 & 89, BII, Ulmann Collection, NYHS. It is an interesting coincidence that Ulmann composed a study of clouds, a subject the master Stieglitz had wholeheartedly embraced during the war. For an explanation on aesthetics and justification, see Sarah Greenough, "How Stieglitz Came to Photograph Clouds," in Perspectives on Photography: Essays in Honor of Beaumont Newhall, ed. Peter Walch and Thomas Barrow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 151-165.

40P114, BII, Ulmann Collection, NYHS. Ulmann always signed her prints in pencil rather than ink.

41One of the best photographs of Ulmann standing next to her camera accompanied Olive D. Campbell's recollections of the photographer in Mountain Life and Work (October 1934), 11.

the-way shacks, Ulmann took along the bulky camera, the tripod, a lens box, and scores of glass plate negatives. Since she hated artificial light and never used a flash, Ulmann "always carried some white sheets along...for reflecting," remembered Allen Eaton.⁴² Because Ulmann was quite frail, she depended on her chauffeur, George Vebler, and several servants to assist her with this gear.⁴³ John Jacob Niles, the Kentucky folk musician who accompanied the photographer on her annual Appalachian visits, assumed most of the responsibility on these trips. He even claimed to have been "her cane" since Ulmann limped badly and depended on a walking stick.⁴⁴ Because composing a single photograph required significant mechanical preparation Ulmann took no action shots or candid photographs. She never used the shutter or meter but made a practice of sliding the lens cap off in order to admit light. Ulmann once declared, "I am the light-meter."⁴⁵ Niles noted that "moving objects were

⁴²Allen Eaton interview, conducted July 1959, partial transcript, Ulmann Collection, Southern Appalachian Archives, Special Collections, Hutchins Library, Berea College (hereafter cited as Ulmann MSS, Berea).

⁴³Bill Murphy to H. E. Taylor, 11 April 1934, Ulmann MSS, Berea. Murphy, of Boone Tavern, Berea, hints at the size of the Ulmann entourage. He is especially worried about the group tying up too many rooms at the local hotel during "commencement time" at Berea College. Ulmann had requested four rooms for the entire months of May and June.

⁴⁴Appalachian Photographs of Doris Ulmann, n.p.

⁴⁵Ibid.

never effective as subjects for her photography."⁴⁶ Nor did Ulmann wish to freeze a moment of action. She much preferred to capture a facial expression or a pair of hands, someone sitting quietly rather than running or even standing.⁴⁷ Ulmann, deliberate and thorough in her craft, eschewed the advances in photography that allowed more amateurs to sport cameras. She also rejected the newer models designed for professional photographers. Niles recalled:

There was no hurry-up, no snapshot business. Snapshot photography was the end of vulgarities so far as she was concerned. When I demanded a Roliflex [sic] and got it and everything that went with it, Doris immediately looked upon me as a complete faker.⁴⁸

Niles' statement seems ironic if the relationship between photographic procedure and the human subject is considered. Ulmann believed a better, truer image would emerge from a technical process that required several minutes to one that took only seconds. She never worried that reality or the sharpness of one moment would escape her. In her opinion the photographers who made quick pictures distorted actual

⁴⁶John Jacob Niles, "Doris Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," The Call Number 19 (Spring 1958), 7.

⁴⁷In the 10,000 prints housed in the Ulmann Archive at the University of Oregon, nearly every subject is seated. A characteristic example is P1266, B10, where an unidentified woman sits quietly in a doorway.

⁴⁸Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 7.

truth by failing to consciously study their subjects. Ulmann was less interested in grabbing a piece of time than in grasping the essence of human character.

A journey south in the late 1920s allowed Ulmann to exercise this philosophy. At the urging of her friend Julia Peterkin, Ulmann headed to South Carolina, where she discovered a rich cultural heritage and fascinating subjects for her camera. Ulmann focussed on black laborers, the Gullah people of Lang Syne Plantation. She witnessed scenes unfamiliar to a rich urbanite, including river baptizings and chain-gang work. In this case Ulmann's selection of subjects gained her more attention than the quality of her work. One New York Times reviewer claimed that Ulmann's pictures were "good" because her subjects were "grand."⁴⁹ Peterkin, however, was impressed enough with the pictures themselves that she used them to illustrate her 1933 publication, Roll, Jordan, Roll.

Within the body of Ulmann's South Carolina work, a line of demarcation exists. The more outstanding, more introspective, compositions are of one or two individuals, not of groups. She pictured a father and son sitting quietly on their front porch, a couple of men standing beside the cotton weight scale at the edge of the field, and

⁴⁹"Current Exhibition News in Brief," New York Times, 3 November 1929, sec. 9, p. 12.

a middle-aged man sitting in the doorway of his barn.⁵⁰ Ulmann even identified several of her favorite sitters, including a man known as "Black Satin" and another affectionately called "Papa Chawlie." Ulmann pinpointed noble qualities in these people whom she believed represented an important, if tiny, segment of society. According to William Clift, Ulmann wanted to record "these unfamiliar pockets of American culture" because "she envisioned a gradual blending of the races in which these types of people would lose their particular distinctiveness."⁵¹ Ulmann, the Progressive, emerges here. As much as she highlighted individual lives, she sought out these particular characters within certain groups. "Types" caught her attention. She preferred subjects who could be easily categorized, whether by their backgrounds, their livelihoods, or their places of residence. Ulmann admired the myriad cultures that comprised American society, but she was especially curious about the ones that could easily vanish without record of their existence being made. Ulmann's interests led her to observe a Shaker settlement in New York and the fisherman's trade in Gloucester.

50P32,33,41, BI, Doris Ulmann Collection, Print Room, New York Historical Society, New York City.

51 The Darkness and the Light, 10.

Massachusetts.⁵² But none of these match the in-depth studies she composed of the men and women of Appalachia.

A change of scenery, a respite from the literary circles, a vaguely-defined mission -- each led Ulmann at certain times to gather her entourage of personal servants for a trip to the mountains. Though Ulmann's choice of photographic subjects drastically changed, from the urban intellectual set to a rural, half-literate class, her artistic philosophy remained the same. She felt it necessary to observe Enos Hardin, a knifemaker, as intensely as she had studied Thornton Wilder or Paul Robeson.⁵³ This is evident by the number of shots she composed of each subject. Ulmann believed still that a single picture could not adequately portray a man, regardless of his outward simplicity. The proof books showing her Appalachian work contain not lone portraits, but serial studies. Ulmann

52P2341-2356, Shaker settlement; P2786-2792, B23; P6423, B52; P7564-7565, 7602-7605, 7618, 7628-7641, 7649, B61; P7692-7704, 7749, B62, Gloucester scenes, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. Ulmann provided a comprehensive look at this fishing village, including the types of boats, the pier buildings, various kinds of equipment, and the characters of the trade.

53Hardin study, P5575-5588, B45; Robeson study, P783-787, B72; Wilder study, P1954, B78, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. The Robeson series was a rare study for Ulmann since she seldom photographed actors. She believed they sought merely attractive likenesses, not wanting "character to show in their faces." Of the portrait session with Wilder, Ulmann recalled he was so enthusiastic that he cancelled all his morning appointments and then said to her, "We might go on all the afternoon if you have nothing else to do," quoted in Warren, "Ulmann: Photographer-in-Waiting," 132, 142.

often made several exposures of the same pose. In one series an unidentified man anxiously holds a Bible stamped "Placed in this motel by the Gideons." The fellow's tense facial expression changes little in the four portraits Ulmann produced.⁵⁴ The sitting could have taken as long as fifteen to thirty minutes, depending upon how swiftly Ulmann removed the exposed plate, covered it, and inserted a new one into her camera. The session's duration, which may have seemed an eternity to the sitter, abolished any hope for spontaneity. In her series on Berea's Union Church, Ulmann exposed several plates of the minister standing at the pulpit. He appears to be addressing a congregation, though the assembly is not recorded by Ulmann. These prints suggest he is delivering a message, yet his mouth remains closed in each photograph. The viewer sees the nature of this man's work but is not offered a live shot of an actual sermon. These photographs, perhaps taken on a Tuesday or Thursday rather than a Sunday morning, nevertheless accomplish Ulmann's goal. The minister, posed with fist on the pulpit, demonstrates his task convincingly.⁵⁵ Ulmann captured substance if not time. This methodology allowed Ulmann a tenuous role, at best, as a traditional

54P1440-1443, B12, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. Throughout the chapter the word "series" will be used to refer to photographs made of the same subject or person.

55P592, B5, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. [check for other series numbers at Berea].

documentarian. That she chose to take several negatives of the same subject, creating a composite study, suggests that her intentions went beyond the mere reproduction of reality.

Another characteristic of Ulmann's work that runs counter to most definitions of documentary style involves posed subjects and arranged scenes. This is perhaps the facet of her work that keeps Ulmann's name out of most documentary photography annals. She saw nothing wrong with trying to create a certain look, and if a simple tilt of her sitter's head achieved it, Ulmann asked that it be done. Niles recalled that Ulmann wanted to pose "everything she photographed" and that her frequent instructions were, "Pose but don't let it seem posed."⁵⁶ More than with her city friends and literary acquaintances, Ulmann attempted to shape her images of Appalachian men and women. She had no intentions of falsifying their existence. Rather, she hoped to enhance the admirable qualities they possessed. To Ulmann, this small pocket of people who remained untouched by the forces of industrialization and mechanization was a nostalgic reminder of an older, simpler America. As a native New Yorker, Ulmann had witnessed the growth of the city and the vice and deterioration which accompanied progress. Throughout Ulmann's youth, hundreds of thousands of immigrants had wandered through Ellis Island, the large

⁵⁶Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 7.

majority packing themselves into New York City tenements. Ulmann, no doubt, questioned the impact of such drastic changes. Her urban experience, as much as anything, motivated her to seek out what was left of pure, undefiled America. She found it in the Appalachian mountains. The people there lived simply, without the aid of modern technology or mass communication. Ulmann realized that the unique culture the mountaineers had preserved could slip as easily away as had that of an innocent young nation. Niles observed:

These were the people she really wanted to get down on paper for posterity. She thought they would finally disappear, and there would be no more of them.⁵⁷

The photographer hoped to take this precious raw material, add her own artistic touches, and create images revealing the last vestiges of a roughhewn American society.

To accomplish her task Ulmann still looked to individuals as her best subjects. Her cordial, gentle manner endeared her to people who might otherwise have balked at the sight of strangers carrying odd-looking equipment. Allen Eaton once remarked that the photographer had a personality that was "very attractive to most anyone. They knew she was earnest and not pretentious.... she was a bit difficult for some country people to get used to because

⁵⁷Ibid., 5.

she was a very fashionable and attractive woman. But she had a personality, a way of getting along with people, and she was very skillful as a photographer."⁵⁸ She and Niles talked to men and women about their work and daily living. If Ulmann felt too unfamiliar with the environment, Niles filled in, since he claimed to be "a Kentucky backwoodsman" himself.⁵⁹ Niles implied an easy camaraderie was established:

We would pull up in front of someone's house right beside a very nicely paved road, take out the camera, set it up, and I would say, 'Folks, we have come to take your picture,' and they would line up in a row and that was all there was to it.⁶⁰

In this case Niles' recollections not only deflate Ulmann's deliberations as an artist, but they also fail to correspond with her Appalachian oeuvre. Nearly every photograph has a single individual as its main focus, not a couple, family, or company. Her corps of images bears out the fact that she turned away from group interaction and collective efforts. The lone woodcarver or chairmaker or quilter received Ulmann's fullest attention.⁶¹ As she highlighted a

⁵⁸Eaton interview, July 1959, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

⁵⁹Niles to W.J. Hutchins, 14 September 1934, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

⁶⁰Niles, "Preface and Recollections," 7.

⁶¹Among the many examples, several of the best include P26, B1; P136, P191-194, B2, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. Also, PP4538, Platinum Prints, Ulmann Archives, Special

character, she drew from his or her face a desired "look" that became her trademark.

Without doubt Ulmann's faces are her most memorable artistic renderings. Intense thought, a faraway glance, neither smile nor frown -- all comprise the "look" Ulmann sought. Rarely does her sitter peer directly into the camera. Ulmann preferred a three-quarter view or profile angle. In the study of Lydia Ramsey, the sitter changes her facial expressions slightly for each of the five negatives. In one photograph she has switched hats, exchanging a flower-topped bonnet for a casual straw. In another series of a different subject, the woman stares contemplatively as she holds up her printed apron for Ulmann to admire.⁶² Within this same series the unidentified woman provides a smile in a couple of photographs. Seldom did Ulmann record a smile. Very few show up in the 10,000 negatives she exposed.

The quality of human character intrigued Ulmann, who tied it to the work people did. Faces were important to her, but hands as a source of industry also fascinated the photographer. She hoped to entwine a man's occupation and his individual character. Of Ulmann's Appalachian portraits, Featherstone notes, "the sitters' hands and the

Collections, University of Oregon Library (hereafter cited as Ulmann Platinum Prints, Oregon).

62P863-867, B7; P1765-1770, B15, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

objects they are holding are often as important as the faces themselves."⁶³ Ulmann's respect for craftspeople and self-sufficient laborers permeated the images of them she created. Perhaps the photographer felt her own personal wealth had ruined her, placing beyond her grasp the simplicity the mountain folks enjoyed. The rich urbanite admired the difference but realized there were few, if any, ways to return to a simple lifestyle once the line had been crossed. Ulmann's situation mirrored that of the nation at large, a struggle with irreversible maturity and affected destiny. Her annual escape from a chaotic city to the chaste wilderness demonstrated Ulmann's private urban/rural conflict. Her photographs reveal the intrinsic beauty she discovered in Samuel Clark's handmade looms, Aunt Cord Ritchie's woven baskets, and Ethel May Stiles' tufted bedspreads. Ulmann held the makers in highest esteem. She was most attracted to a "person who was doing something," remembered Niles.⁶⁴

The photographer often pictured her industrious subjects engaged in the creative process or surrounded by their finished products. Her portraits included specific materials and tools of trade. Emery MacIntosh, a tombstone

⁶³Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits, 55.

⁶⁴Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 5. Also, P490, B4, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon; P1068, P1783, Doris Ulmann Photograph Collection, Art Department Library, Berea College (hereafter cited as Ulmann Photographs, Berea).

maker in Breathitt County, Kentucky, holds a chisel and hammer in his portrait. Oscar Cantrell, a North Carolina blacksmith, works at his equipment with a wrench, and Issac Davis, a broommaker, shows one of his handmade items.⁶⁵ Ulmann hoped to connect these people with their respective vocations, but she held onto an artistic quirk regarding this point. The photographer never asked a person to look at his work or observe his task. The sitter stared off into the distance somewhere, while his or her hands attended the job. Ulmann showed one of the Ritchie men of Blue Lick, Kentucky, weaving a chair bottom without actually looking at it. Likewise, Hayden Hensley, an accomplished carver, holds a knife and a piece of wood, but has turned away from his job. In the large majority of these vocation portraits, Ulmann revealed busy minds and active hands without relating the two. It seems that Ulmann tried to picture men and women thinking grander thoughts than how to snap beans, make hammer handles, or tan animal hides. These people appear to be contemplators, not mere tradesmen. They possessed the secrets for carrying on productive, fulfilling, yet simple, lives. Ulmann recognized that their inherent wealth had little to do with material riches.⁶⁶

65P4317, P3609, P755, Ulmann Photographs, Berea.

66See P2201, P3002, P3592, P4540, P5579, Ulmann Photographs, Berea.

The mountain people who most intrigued Ulmann were the elderly folks. She believed their years of experience made them the perfect character studies. On Ulmann's selection of subjects, Niles observed:

You had to be an individual, a character more or less, before she was interested in you even a little bit.... I think she loved most the white mountaineers, the old patriarch types.... She saw in their faces the care and the trouble of the awful effort they had made to carry on life now that they had reached the afternoon or evening of their days.⁶⁷

Ulmann's photographs accurately reflect Niles' interpretations. She focussed on long white beards, furrowed brows, bespectacled dim eyes, and parched wrinkled faces. In an extended series marked "unknown, before 1931" Ulmann composed fourteen portraits of an older, copiously whiskered fellow. In one photograph, he tugs slightly at his beard, holding it for Ulmann's approval. She may well have asked him to show his whiskers proudly for the camera.⁶⁸ In another series Ulmann photographed a man sporting a long, odd-looking mustache.⁶⁹ She composed several other portraits highlighting her fascination with

⁶⁷Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 5.

⁶⁸P1671-1684, B14, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. This outstanding series shows the wide range of Ulmann's portrait-making abilities, especially thorough treatment of a single subject.

⁶⁹P4244, Ulmann Photographs, Berea.

the bearded elders of Appalachia.⁷⁰ Of their travels together, Niles recalled Ulmann's tenacity in seeking out her preferred subjects:

She was willing to put up with any kind of weather, any kind of heat, any kind of rain... for the sake of getting to some out-of-the-way, God-forsaken spot where some ancient with a long white beard and a shock of white hair was sitting in front of his little cabin.⁷¹

Many of the subjects Ulmann photographed before 1931 remain unidentified and are marked accordingly in the print books. She and Niles opted to keep more thorough written records on the journeys they took together later, between 1931 and 1934. However, a substantial number of these old men and women remain anonymous, mere examples of a "type" that Ulmann was seeking to capture.

Besides healthy beards, other characteristics of age and wisdom appear in Ulmann photographs to categorize further the individual subjects. One sage holds a thick cane, while in another print, a toothless woman has donned a huge sunbonnet. A Whitesburg, Kentucky man, wearing tiny spectacles, sits for one of Ulmann's most outstanding compositions. In his face one can see and understand why Ulmann claimed with such conviction, "I have been more deeply moved by some of my mountaineers than by any literary

⁷⁰See P1411, P3262, P4686, Ulmann Photographs, Beres: also, P1047, B9, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

⁷¹Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 4-5.

person, distinguished as he may be."⁷² A Bible appears occasionally in Ulmann portraits of the elderly mountain people. Whether the photographer carried one with her as an appropriate prop remains an unanswered question. She could easily have "borrowed" from her hotel the Gideon Bible that showed up in one series of pictures.⁷³ A more genuine expression graces the weathered face of Aunt Winnie Felther, of Hyden, Kentucky, who more than likely holds her own Bible in her lap. Ulmann provided striking contrasts by placing the dark leathered book on a light apron surrounded by the busy print of Felther's dress.⁷⁴ The trademark gaze that so many Ulmann subjects assume is lost on another unidentified sitter. With a determined look on her face, this woman holds open a book of hymn tunes. Within this series other photographs reveal the book's title -- "Revival Gems." The woman's stern face, needing no words of explanation, hints at a fire-and-brimstone message.⁷⁵ Capitalizing on symbols of wisdom and experience, Ulmann revealed her reverence for the aged. Not only the objects but the faces, too, tell her story. Ulmann justified her fervent concentration on older people, saying:

⁷²Warren, "Ulmann: Photographer-in-Waiting," 139. P1395, P3262, P4686, Ulmann Photographs, Berea.

⁷³P1440-1443, B12, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

⁷⁴P4789, Ulmann Photographs, Berea.

⁷⁵P6464, B52, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

A face that has the marks of having lived intensely, that expresses some phase of life, some dominant quality or intellectual power, constitutes for me an interesting face. For this reason, the face of an older person, perhaps not beautiful in the strictest sense, is usually more appealing than the face of a younger person who has scarcely been touched by life.⁷⁶

The photographer challenged the intensely popular movement which celebrated youth. Ulmann's few words, combined with thousands of images, spoke to her adversaries who declared the 1920s a decade of and for the very young. In his fiction, F. Scott Fitzgerald thoroughly dissected the attitudes and habits of the young, those in their late teens or twenties. Magazine editors filled their pages with stories concerning the "new generation." As literary critic Frederick Hoffman has pointed out:

No aspect of the decade was more thoroughly burlesqued or more seriously considered than the behavior and affectations of the young generation. They lived all over Manhattan, at both ends of Fifth Avenue, and disported themselves in a manner that amused Vanity Fair's humorists, impressed its book reviewers, and provoked replies and analyses from its sophisticated journalists.⁷⁷

Ulmann's artistic renderings stand in opposition to this popular cultural phenomenon. Instead of reflecting American culture, the images send an opposing message, nostalgic in

⁷⁶Ulmann quoted in Warren, "Ulmann: Photographer-in-Waiting," 139.

⁷⁷Hoffman, American Writing in the Postwar Decade, 110.

tone -- wisdom accompanies age and neither should be abandoned for the sake of a passing fad.

In Ulmann's attempts to preserve what she believed was quickly vanishing, she occasionally recreated an existing scene in order to achieve authenticity. Featherstone issues a warning to researchers hoping to use Ulmann's photographs as historical documents or historical evidence. He relates that she "set up" shots when she needed the correct lighting and that she "dressed up" people in clothes they would not normally have worn. He also discusses Ulmann's practice of creating situations that were not indicative of the time.⁷⁸ Gene Thornton, in a 1975 New York Times piece, noted the same, saying that "in 1933... Ulmann was still dressing her Appalachian hillbillies in grandmother's dresses and posing them with spinning wheels that they no longer knew how to use."⁷⁹ Unfortunately he provided no evidence supporting his contention. Ulmann's posings were far from egregious deceptions and involved only limited reconstruction. Niles recounted that young women "would bring down spinning wheels and portions of looms and cards and other things, and show us how their ancestors carried on, and we would photograph them in their granny's old linsey-woolsey

⁷⁸Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits, 17, 58-60.

⁷⁹Gene Thornton, "Ulmann Forces A New Look at Pictorialism," New York Times, 12 January 1975, sec. D, 23.

dresses."⁸⁰ The subjects were at least willing partners, if not initiators of the recreations. These people, whether they knew it or not, were part of a larger project Ulmann had embraced.

In the late twenties Ulmann had enjoyed a conversation with Allen Eaton, a fellow New Yorker interested in producing a book on mountain handicrafts. Impressed by Ulmann's recent studies of Appalachian people, Eaton asked if she would be willing to illustrate his proposed book with photographs. She agreed. Overwhelmed by Ulmann's response, Eaton remembered:

Her eagerness to continue this work is unforgettable, and her pleasure at being able to combine her interests with the opportunity to photograph highlands handicraft workers was such that she offered to undertake the project at her own expense.⁸¹

Eaton and Ulmann shared the same ideas about this unique people tied to the land and dependent upon their hands for survival. Both feared that self-sufficient existence and the solidity it represented would soon vanish. They felt that these creative endeavors had to be recorded.⁸²

⁸⁰Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 7.

⁸¹Eaton, "Doris Ulmann Photograph Collection," 10.

⁸²Jessica Tanno, "Urban Eye on Appalachia," Americana, July/August 1982, 30. Also, Featherstone, Doris Ulmann: American Portraits, 50-52.

The dictates of Eaton's project led Ulmann to photograph various scenes of mountain women, even children, at the spinning wheel or loom. She pictured old Aunt Lou Kitchen at her wheel.⁸³ In another series, a cherubic toddler dressed in her Sunday best holds a basket. She, too, sits in front of a spinning wheel. In this photograph, Ulmann magnificently achieved her trademark "faraway glance." With her bonneted head tilted, the child looks away.⁸⁴ The elements revealed in this particular portrait reflect careful composition, thus challenging Ulmann's role as mere documentarian of handicrafts' operations. In another series of a different subject, Ulmann has the spinner look away from her task while the photographer focuses on the sitter's dress. The complex pattern is highlighted through the wheel spokes.⁸⁵ Ulmann, who enjoyed studying the printed designs on the mountaineers' homemade dresses, often directed her lens toward the lines and shapes of those patterns. Softly-screened faces provided exquisite contrast to sharp, geometric designs.

The pictorialist in Ulmann always intact, she pinpointed a lone hand on a weaving machine, the threads illumined so they appear as fine as angel hair. The cross strands, barely focussed, look even more fragile and

83P2663, Ulmann Photographs, Berea.

84P4423,B36, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

85P26, B1, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

delicate.⁸⁶ Ulmann, a master of composition, employed light here to its fullest advantage and created a work of art. The inspiration White and Stieglitz had provided her revealed itself yet again. Ulmann personified an observation made by Stieglitz in his 1899 essay, "Pictorial Photography." In it he maintained that "nearly all the greatest work is being, and has always been done, by those who are following photography for the love of it, and not merely for financial reasons."⁸⁷ As a photographic artist, Ulmann clung to the pictorialist principles on into the 1930s, while her contemporaries left behind the soft focus and glimmer.⁸⁸ Ulmann continued to pursue photography for art's sake, ignoring the prospect of fame for herself. Though Ulmann produced an impressive body of work for Eaton, she never saw full fruition of the project. Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands (1937) was published three years after she died.⁸⁹ Eaton later said that Ulmann "didn't realize that she had made the most definitive collection of

⁸⁶P1219, B10, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

⁸⁷Alfred Stieglitz, "Pictorial Photography," Scribner's Magazine, November 1899, rep. in Classic Essays on Photography, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn: Leete's Island, 1980), 115-123.

⁸⁸Thornton, "New Look at Pictorialism," 23. Thornton says that Ulmann "persisted in her fondness for outmoded Pictorial effects."

⁸⁹Allen Hendershott Eaton, Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1937).

rural characters, certainly in the field of handicrafts, that's been done any place in the world."⁹⁰

Ulmann's work as a mountain crafts photographer opened several new doors for her. In 1933 she made her first visit to Berea College, a unique institution where students helped keep alive the arts of their Kentucky ancestors. The college charged no tuition but provided education to poorer students who worked to keep the school running. One of Berea College's goals was to uphold "the ideal of simplicity" while "contributing to the spiritual and material welfare of the mountain region of the South, affording to young people of character and promise a thorough Christian education...."⁹¹ Berea's president, William J. Hutchins, had become familiar with Ulmann's photography in 1930 while at a "Mountain Workers' Conference" in Knoxville. Impressed with her work, he sent her a letter of appreciation, to which she replied:

Your words have made me feel that I have perhaps succeeded in expressing a little of the great and deep humanity of these fine and sturdy mountain people. It helps to know that one's work has been of some value.⁹²

⁹⁰Eaton interview, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

⁹¹Bulletin fo Berea College and Allied Schools, General Catalog, 1933-34 (Berea, Ky.: Berea College Press, 1933), 11-12.

⁹²Ulmann to Hutchins, April 1930; Hutchins to Ulmann, 28 March 1930, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

Hutchins hoped to take advantage of Ulmann's work for his own cause at Berea. Knowing the photographer was collaborating with Allen Eaton of the Russell Sage Foundation, Hutchins contacted Eaton about possible acquisition of some Ulmann prints. Eaton assured the president that he planned to see Ulmann in the near future in order to arrange an exhibit for the college.⁹³

In the next couple of years, Ulmann decided to make her own journey to Berea. She depended heavily on Niles, who knew the region well. Though the terms of his employment were never clearly stated, he served as a guide, an assistant, even a secretary to Ulmann. He often signed letters "John Jacob Niles for Doris Ulmann." In return she financed his fledgling musical career, which he cultivated in New York City. Niles, a folk musician, found these trips back to the mountains advantageous for his own work. He collected tunes and ballads of the highland culture and hoped someday to publish these in a collection. Niles implored the help of the Berea College English Department in his search for unusual words or phrases, which he planned to check out in glossaries of early Saxon usage. Niles told President Hutchins that he planned to produce a "Dictionary of Southern Mountain English" to explain "the origins of our strange words."⁹⁴ Niles' goals complemented Ulmann's

⁹³Eaton to Hutchins, 21 July 1930, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

⁹⁴Niles to Hutchins, 16 August 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

objectives. They conducted their respective searches on common ground. Berea College and the surrounding environs proved a fertile area for the continuation of their work in the mountains.

In response to President Hutchins' request, Ulmann agreed to show her photographs at Berea College in the fall of 1933. Hutchins also planned to have Niles conduct a morning assembly program for the student body in conjunction with the Ulmann photography show. Hutchins made no suggestions as to what Niles should "say or sing...act and wear," since he trusted the musician's "sympathetic appreciation of the mountain people."⁹⁵ In an effort to appeal to the students, Ulmann and Niles decided the exhibition pictures should focus on youth "rather than the old folk of the hills." Ulmann selected "enough pictures to cover the Mountain subject" and sent these ahead to the college so they would be on display before her arrival in October. Niles worked out all the logistical details of the trip, assuming the correspondence duties in the weeks prior to their departure from New York. He appeared to be quite devoted to what he termed the "Berea movement" which was, in his opinion, "constructive education."⁹⁶ Niles and Ulmann

⁹⁵Niles to Hutchins, 20 September 1933; Hutchins to Niles, 30 September 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

⁹⁶Niles to Hutchins, 16 August 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

arrived in Berea the last week in October to show their support for the Appalachian institution.

Since their visit was a brief one, Ulmann got only a small taste of what Berea College was like. She described her trip as "a very beautiful experience," adding:

It is with impatience that I am looking forward to the time in the Spring when I hope to make pictures of the activity and interesting people at your college. There are many things which I saw which ought to be recorded in the best possible way....97

Ulmann had little time to take photographs while at Berea, but she did manage to take formal portraits of President Hutchins and his wife.⁹⁸ She welcomed the opportunity and cordially offered to make any number of prints the couple might want "to use for publication or any other purpose."⁹⁹

⁹⁷Ulmann to President and Mrs. Hutchins, 3 November 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

⁹⁸P96-102, B1; B3, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. Ten portraits of President Hutchins alone are in Book 3; also, Plate List, Doris Ulmann Archive, Special Collections, University of Oregon Library. P220, Ulmann Photographs, Berea. This view of a table and chair inside the Hutchins' home is unusual, since Ulmann preferred to have people in her photographs. She probably took this one at the urging of Mr. or Mrs. Hutchins.

⁹⁹Ulmann to Hutchins, 4 January [?], Ulmann MSS, Berea. The letter contains no reference to the year, but 1934 is the only possible year it could have been, since she made her first trip to the college in October 1933 then died ten months later.

Limited to these few portraits, Ulmann grew anxious to return to the college in order "to do some real work."¹⁰⁰

Overwhelmed by Berea College's mission, Ulmann described her response in a letter to President and Mrs. Hutchins. She remarked that the college had made "a deep and delightful impression" and then continued:

My thoughts have been busy with your very remarkable and effective institution. It is a blessing to know of a place in the world where everybody is giving out of the fullness of his heart without ever thinking of a spiritual or material return.¹⁰¹

Niles and Hutchins, however, could not afford to ignore the possible financial returns. They certainly discussed money matters in their correspondence and probably did so in their private conversations. At one point Niles recommended that Hutchins try to make some money for the college from an Ulmann photography exhibit:

Perhaps you can do this later at some other city where the rich could be caught and impressed with your needs....Dont [sic] mind about paying me, or Miss Ulmann, we carry on somehow.... My motto is 'OTHERS'....¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰Ulmann to Mrs. A. N. Gould, 20 November 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea. Elizabeth (Mrs. A. N) Gould was in the Art Department at Berea College.

¹⁰¹Ulmann to President and Mrs. Hutchins, 3 November 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

¹⁰²Niles to Hutchins, 16 August 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea. The ellipsis points are Niles', who creatively used his own punctuation system. He also spelled words poorly, perhaps a result of his atrocious typing skills.

No doubt Ulmann would have been appalled to learn that Niles had even mentioned their personal finances to Hutchins. The two "carried on" their work because Ulmann had plenty of money to do so. She had no intention of seeking payment, and she willingly assumed any expenses Berea College incurred regarding her portraits. She paid all costs to ship her photographs even if the institution had asked for them.¹⁰³ In addition, she promptly returned a \$25.00 check Hutchins had sent to Niles after his appearance at Berea.¹⁰⁴ While focussing on "others," Niles worked hard at promoting his own interests. When he learned that someone had arranged for him to sing a benefit concert for Berea in New York City, he quickly dropped the altruistic tone. He wrote to Hutchins that he had known nothing about the benefit until he read it in the newspapers.¹⁰⁵ The concert was immediately cancelled. In the months following, Niles' communications centered around financial matters. However noble his intentions where Berea was concerned, his talk was of money -- Ulmann's money. Early on, Niles suggested the photographer make a contribution of prints to the college

¹⁰³Ulmann to Mrs. A. N. Gould, 20 November 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

¹⁰⁴Hutchins to Niles, 30 October 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea. Hutchins speaks of the kind gesture in his letter.

¹⁰⁵Niles to Hutchins, 20 September 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

for a permanent exhibition.¹⁰⁶ The next month he told Hutchins, "The idea of a permanent exhibition is one she [Ulmann] has long considered."¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Niles noted that Ulmann was enthusiastic about providing the funds for a new art building at Berea. Her appreciation for the school and its work was unparalleled. She more than likely would have supported it even without Niles' constant insistence. But her personal devotion to Berea College made the last year of Ulmann's life one of her most memorable and certainly one of her most productive.

Ulmann spent the winter of 1933-34 as she spent most winters. She attended the theatre, the opera, and the ballet for entertainment, but she stayed long hours in her darkroom developing the faces and views of her Southern summer.¹⁰⁸ Since she had become rather frail, as a result of severe stomach problems, she finally relented and let Niles help her develop the photographs. Afraid to

¹⁰⁶Niles to Hutchins, 20 September 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea. Niles tells Hutchins of his suggestion to Ulmann and then asks what kinds of photos the college would like to have--"Old men...young ones...children...ancient females...musicians... workmen...etc..."

¹⁰⁷Niles to Hutchins, October 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

¹⁰⁸Niles to Hutchins, 20 September 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea. Niles noted the resulted of their summer's work--"She has about 1100 plates and I have three note books full of various sentimentalities." In The Appalachian Photographs of Doris Ulmann, Niles recalls accompanying Ulmann to numerous events, including "the best of the current New York plays."

compromise her artistry, she continued to hold the reins tight. Niles remembered:

If I assisted her, she stood over me and watched everything I did, telling me forty times how to do the simplest operation, how to pick up the glass plates and how to put them in a frame to dry. She mixed all the chemicals. She did let me make prints occasionally, but I would get weary of the enterprise about midnight, and move on, and she'd continue working until the early hours of the morning.¹⁰⁹

Ulmann made a few portraits in the off season, but not to the extent she had done in the 1920s. In her later portraits, she focussed on one subject -- John Jacob Niles. Of all the individuals Ulmann photographed, Niles figures most prominently. Three extended series of him, all taken in Ulmann's studio, indicate he was a showman, quite the grimacer. In one series, Niles is dressed up in evening clothes, complete with top hat, white tie, and cane. In a couple of these portraits he wears a mysterious facial expression, halfway shielded by his coat.¹¹⁰ His penchant for music is highlighted in another series. Ulmann focussed particularly on his hands -- playing the piano or writing notes on a musical score. She connected him with his livelihood and his artistry, just as she had done with the weavers and carvers of Appalachia. Niles appeared the willing subject who offered a variety of poses for his

¹⁰⁹Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 4.

¹¹⁰B35, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

friend's camera.¹¹¹ This busy winter they shared would be their last together in New York.

When spring finally arrived, Ulmann made plans to return to Berea College. Niles took care of the preparatory details, notifying Hutchins that "on about the 10th of April the 7th Ulmann Niles Folk Lore Photographic Expedition [sic] will set out. With cars and trailers and cameras and note books...."¹¹² Niles also informed the president that Ulmann would be willing to meet and talk with any students interested in taking a master-photography class. Upon her arrival Ulmann received a rather confusing request from President Hutchins:

I wish I could make a contract with you to the effect that you will let me make all manner of suggestions to you as to pictures of men, women, and things, always with the understanding that you will do exactly as you please, without feeling the remotest constraint from me.¹¹³

Ulmann offered no written response, but the photographic work she completed in her few weeks at the college must have pleased its president. Ulmann observed Berea's various departments and provided extensive coverage of its operations. She took photographs of drama students parading

¹¹¹P1583-1601, B13; P1720-1737, B54, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

¹¹²Niles to Hutchins, 11 March 1934, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

¹¹³Hutchins to Ulmann, 2 May 1934, Ulmann MSS, Berea. Since Ulmann had already arrived in Berea, Hutchins directed his request to Boone Tavern, where she was staying.

in costume and of woodworking students using hammers and saws.¹¹⁴ Her documentation of the students' sheep-shearing process began with an unsheared sheep. She followed the complete procedure and ended her series with a telling photograph -- a wool-stuffed sack sitting on the market scale.¹¹⁵ Berea College, since it made no money from student tuition payments, perpetuated itself through such agricultural endeavors. Ulmann hoped to reveal the unique nature of the school, along with the contributions made by its hard-working young men and women. She recorded the dairy and creamery operations, again showing various stages in the production process.¹¹⁶ She took pictures in the candy kitchen, the bakery, and in other food service areas. Many of the products made in these kitchens served guests in the college's downtown hotel, Boone Tavern. As with all her Berea work, Ulmann wanted to highlight the "process." She made photographic studies of girls kneading flour, stirring pastry mix, and decorating cakes. Several photographs show the intricate work done on tiny sugar candies.¹¹⁷

In all of Ulmann's work, the Berea images most closely fit into the category of "documentary" photography. The

114B2a, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

115P778-789, B7, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

116P652-670, B6, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

117P226-243, B2a; P682-685, P733-753, B6. Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

action and the visual records Ulmann took of procedures anticipated the similar style that emerged a few years later in U.S. Government-sponsored photography. Even the candid expressions on some students' faces bear this out. Ulmann captured a priceless classroom scene where Dean Baird was surrounded by students. The boys attempted, with obvious difficulty, to fight back or get rid of their smiles. The serious business of "education" was lost on them. They managed to look contemplative in only one photograph.¹¹⁸ The hundreds of Berea images Ulmann took reveal her deep interest in the institution. President Hutchins once asked her to suggest one photograph that would "incarnate the ideals of Berea," then he quickly answered. "I realize that this is a rather large and possibly impossible order."¹¹⁹ Ulmann no doubt agreed, for she wrote that the story of Berea would be a difficult one to portray since "the whole atmosphere... must be felt."¹²⁰

Ulmann also lent her support to another unusual mountain school in the 1930s. The John C. Campbell Folk School, in Brasstown, North Carolina, encouraged education in highland crafts such as woodcarving and quilt-making. Ulmann's acquaintance with the school was probably

¹¹⁸P65-69, B1, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

¹¹⁹Hutchins to Ulmann, 29 May 1934, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

¹²⁰Ulmann to President and Mrs. Hutchins, 3 November 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

encouraged by Niles, who enjoyed the strong musical traditions of the area. Olive Campbell, wife of the school's founder, spoke highly of Niles' talent and ambition, noting that "he learned folk song from his own father and mother. During the years he has gone on collecting and harmonizing not only mountain songs but negro and others wherever he comes upon them."¹²¹ Ulmann included Niles in a large number of her Brasstown portraits. In one photograph, labelled "Old Timers' Day," Niles sits with a dulcimer in his lap while several elderly gentlemen listen to his performance.¹²² Niles attempted to interview as many dulcimer makers as he could locate. The dulcimer, a violin-shaped, stringed instrument, remained a Southern Appalachian specialty, and Niles made sure Ulmann photographed the ones he found.¹²³ She made one print of Niles holding a dulcimer while busily taking notes as a young black boy talked to him.¹²⁴ Though Ulmann never used models, a figure who appears in a good portion of her Brasstown work is a teenager named Virginia Howard. Ulmann posed Howard in several portraits, but the oddest combination paired the young woman with Niles in an extended photographic study.

¹²¹Mrs. J. C. Campbell to Mrs. A. N. Gould, 15 July 1933, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

¹²²P9, Ulmann Photographs, Berea.

¹²³B31, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. This book contains an entire series of Niles with various types of dulcimers.

¹²⁴P1634, B13, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

Ulmann placed the two very close to each other in heavily-shadowed light. Niles' hands cover Howard's hands which rest softly on a dulcimer. Their best intentions speak to the valuable nature of America's indigenous sources, but the forced facial expressions provide a rather comical image.¹²⁵ A side journey provided Ulmann with a fascinating subject for her camera and, at the same time, satisfied Niles' taste for folk music. The two travelled to a remote area where a lone cabin bore a sign announcing, "American Folk Song Society Presents the Second American Folk Song Festival." No indication is given as to how many people attended the event, but in Niles' identification of the print he wrote, "Cabin Where Festival Was Held: Mostly Bunk."¹²⁶

Ulmann packed as many of these side trips into her schedule as she could handle. In the summer of 1934, she visited central and eastern Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina. In addition to her work at Berea, she completed numerous portraits at Brasstown, and she continued her assignment on Appalachian handicrafts for Allen Eaton. Ulmann's illness caught up with her in August, as she worked for yet another cause, the Farmers' Cooperative Union of

¹²⁵P612, Ulmann Photographs, Berea; also, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

¹²⁶B39, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. When the Ulmann print collection was mounted into scrapbooks, Niles labelled many of the photographs, identifying numerous people from the trips to Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Cross references may be found in his own work, The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961).

Asheville, North Carolina. The last portraits Ulmann composed were of the Hipps family, who lived on top of Turkey Mountain just south of Asheville.¹²⁸ Niles remembered that:

these people had been expecting us and they had a dinner laid out on a long table, with children standing over it...to brush the flies off the table. I suppose they had everything on that table a human being could think of in that part of the country to eat....¹²⁹

Ulmann chose a very uncharacteristic scene to mark her last photograph. A girl with a bucket in each hand walks toward a cabin. Ulmann shows not her face but her back as she retreats through the woods.¹³⁰ Ulmann never composed another portrait. Within the month she was dead.

The photographer's frailties had overtaken her while she was in the Appalachian mountains, and her travelling companion, rather than her own chauffeur, rushed her back to New York for medical treatment. In the days before she died Ulmann composed a will, generously leaving the bulk of her life's work and wealth to Berea College, the Campbell Folk

¹²⁸Niles' Notebook, Art Library, Department of Art, Berea College. Portions of Niles' notes remain at Berea. In these, he point out that "these pictures represent the last work in Doris Ulmann's life." The photograph notations he made include P123, 127, 130, 133, 148, 151, 157, Ulmann Photographs, Berea. Niles' Ballad Book (1961) mentions dates of various visits. In the summer of 1934, the Ulmann-Niles schedule was extremely rigorous.

¹²⁹Niles, "Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," 9.

¹³⁰P123, B2, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

School, and to John Jacob Niles. She was quite explicit in her wish that no one person profit from her photography. She indicated that "in no event shall any one except a public charitable, scientific, art or educational institution or other public institution or the public in general acquire any beneficial interest in the money or property held hereunder."¹³¹ Additionally, she requested that any prints, exhibits, or distribution of her work be done solely to "further the development of photography as an art and further the understanding of American life, especially of the South...."¹³²

The South's attractive qualities had drawn Ulmann to it, but the complexities of her urban existence had pushed her out of the city. The individuals who sat for her in her last years impressed Ulmann much more deeply than did those she photographed in her early years. As William Clift aptly put it:

The Appalachian and black photographs make it clear that Ulmann's purpose was not social commentary. Her aim was not to record conditions—the effects of poverty, the black-white problem, the misery of people's existence; rather, her intent was to show the wealth of individual character belonging to her subjects and how they had come to possess it.¹³³

¹³¹Deed of Trust, Will and Bequest of Doris Ulmann, Series II, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³William Clift in Darkness and the Light, 9.

More than likely Ulmann believed these people deserved utmost respect. They had treated her far more graciously than some of her earlier, more famous sitters. Calvin Coolidge took his time finishing lunch one day while Ulmann stood waiting outside on his porch. Vice President Dawes committed a more egregious sin in that he allowed Ulmann to take only one photograph, after she had travelled to Washington for the sitting.¹³⁴ No doubt Ulmann felt refreshed by the honesty, the lack of pretension she discovered among her Southern subjects.

Unfortunately Ulmann never got to study the South as thoroughly as she had hoped. She wanted to complete photographic series of the Cajuns of southcentral Louisiana and the Creoles of New Orleans. A 1929 trip to Louisiana with Peterkin had piqued Ulmann's interest in these two groups. In addition, her contact with Lyle Saxon, who romanticized old Louisiana in his nostalgic tales, kept Ulmann intrigued with the region's assorted subcultures. She even found the author himself a curious study for her portraiture.¹³⁵ The

¹³⁴Warren, "Ulmann: Photographer-in-Waiting," 131. P1615, B76, the single portrait of Dawes; P1927-1932, B78, and P1316-1318, B75, two series of Coolidge, including P1320 and P1324 of Mrs. Coolidge, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

¹³⁵P719-722, B72; P6219-6227, B50; P8333-8350, B67, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon. Saxon is dressed up in his three-piece tweed, sporting a boutonniere. A French doll dresser figures prominently in these photographs as does Saxon's black servant boy. In the proof books, Niles identified Saxon as a "Writer of Sorts."

photographer was able to compose portraits of the sisters of the Ursuline order and the Sisters of the Holy Family, an all-black order, but after 1931 she never returned to accomplish her proposed projects on the Cajun and Creole types.¹³⁶

In Ulmann's search for types, she found individuals. Reared and educated as a turn-of-the-century Progressive, the rich urban dweller put her talents to work in order to preserve what was left of a purer, older America. She attempted to record specifically-defined groups before modernization intervened and blurred the lines of distinctiveness. She highlighted qualities she believed inherent in the groups, but eventually discovered that patience and assiduity were individual enterprises. Ulmann hoped to illuminate the noble traits of the people she encountered, an idea carried on into the 1930s by better-known documentary photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. But unlike her contemporaries, Ulmann did not send her photographs to a government agency or newspaper or magazine for publication. She delivered the prints back to the schools and the subjects she had photographed. Knowing that 3000 undeveloped negatives remained, Ulmann made provisions in her August 1934 will to have distributed to Berea College and to the Campbell Folk School the prints concerning their respective activities. She wanted the

136P5341, B43, Ulmann Proof Books, Oregon.

Russell Sage Foundation to receive prints regarding handicrafts. She also instructed "that each person who was the subject of any photograph taken in the Southern Mountains...be given a copy of the print...."137

Using her finely-tuned observation skills, Ulmann studied individuals and then created portraits, scores of them. Her subjects were appropriate for documentary work, but her equipment was not. She never used a Rolleiflex, a Speed Graphic, or a roll of 35mm film. Her subjects' faces were recorded on heavy glass plates. Twenty-five years after her death, the body of Ulmann's work was transferred from Columbia University to the University of Oregon for preservation. Realizing the tremendous cost of such a move, Ulmann's friend Allen Eaton assumed the responsibility of choosing representative photographs. He perused each series and broke the "unnecessary" plates, leaving only one or two poses of each individual. In the process, he compromised Ulmann's diverse vision. The complex studies she had painstakingly composed of Berea's bakery operations, of the Mount Lebanon Shaker settlement, of Virginia Howard and John Jacob Niles, of the Ritchie girls, among thousands of others, were destroyed instantly. Of various individuals, Eaton selected similar poses, so that reproduction of the

137Deed of Trust, Will and Bequest of Doris Ulmann. Ulmann MSS, Berea. Correspondence from August 1936 reveals that President Hutchins was quite helpful in locating prints and having prints made for the subjects and their relatives.

surviving negatives suggests one-dimensional sight on Ulmann's part, far removed from the actual artistic philosophy she harbored and exercised. Soon after her death, President Hutchins had declared:

It is fortunate indeed that before her passing she was able to capture and hold forever before the American public these portraits of types which may pass all too soon from the American scene.¹³⁸

In retrospect, the statement seems tragically ironic, since the public will remain unaware of Ulmann's thorough "documentation" of American culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Ulmann never considered one picture's worth. Instead, she believed in the magic a thousand pictures could wield over the power of mere words.

¹³⁸Hutchins to Niles, 1 September 1934, Ulmann MSS, Berea.

AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS

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Pages 61-69, photographs by Doris Ulmann

University Microfilms International

VIEWS FROM THE LOWER EAST SIDE

The secret places of the heart are the real mainsprings
of one's action.

Dorothea Lange

Dorothea Lange spent over sixty years living what she called a "visual life." She admitted that such an existence was "an enormous undertaking, practically unattainable," yet she claimed to have pursued it from a very early age.¹ Lange's most vivid childhood memories revolved around the skills of observation she cultivated and finely tuned on New York City streets in the first decades of the twentieth century. Her experiences there as a young girl affected her approach to the world and to the individual lives she studied throughout her career as a photographer. Lange made no conscious decision to become a photographer, but she felt that she had always been, at some stage in the development of her craft, either "getting to be a photographer, or wanting to be a photographer, or beginning to be a photographer...."² Things visual piqued an insatiable

¹Dorothea Lange, Interviews conducted for the soundtrack of the National Education Television film on Dorothea Lange, undated, unedited transcripts, transcribed by Meg Partridge, Art Department, Oakland Museum, Oakland, California (hereafter cited as NET Soundtrack interviews).

²Dorothea Lange, "Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer," interviews by Suzanne Riess, October 1960-August 1961, transcript, p. 1, Oral History Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter cited as Lange-Riess interview).

curiosity in Lange, one to which she devoted a lifetime of care and attention.

As a child Lange developed a serious outlook toward the world, an attitude she maintained throughout her life. She felt that she had been led to photography by instinct, which she found difficult to explain. Only years later did she learn that her great uncles who had come to America from southern Germany had all been lithographers. The sons had followed their fathers in the trade, making visual images with grease, water, and ink.³ Lange believed that her love for pictures came from these ancestors she never knew. She once said:

I've sometimes wondered whether these things that we do on our own, the directions that we take and the choices of work, are not determined by something in the blood....I think that there is some kind of memory that the blood carries.... There are certain drives that we have.⁴

Less than proud of her Teutonic background, Lange consciously rejected a trait that she believed to be inherent in all Germans -- an unwavering respect for authority. Exhibited by her mother and other relatives, such reverence bothered Lange, who complained that Germans were constantly concerned about "what other people would think of them."⁵ Throughout

3NET Soundtrack interviews. 136.

4Lange-Riess interview, 11.

5Ibid., 5-6.

her career, Lange enjoyed a personal independence that she had nurtured as a young girl. A profession in photography suited her, since it freed her from the control of supervisors and superiors and enabled her to preserve "a very great instinct for freedom."⁶

A fierce sense of independence buttressed her disdain for authority but also set her apart from others. Her strong will developed principally out of a yearning for self-protection. A few years after Lange's birth in 1895, her father abandoned the family. Lange's mother, forced to become the sole breadwinner, sought employment across the river from their Hoboken, New Jersey, home. She took a job in a library on New York's Lower East Side, and enrolled young Dorothea in a nearby public school. Lange saw firsthand the steady stream of immigrants who packed themselves into the bustling Jewish neighborhoods. And she competed daily with ambitious children who strove diligently to succeed in their new homeland. A German Protestant. Lange was the only non-Jew in a school of 3,000 Jewish students. It was here that she learned what it was like to be in the minority, but as she pointed out, "I was a minority group of one."⁷ A loner, Lange shielded herself from her classmates' world, closely observing it but never becoming part of it. After school she spent late afternoons

⁶NET Soundtrack interviews, 137.

⁷Lange-Riess interview, 13.

staring out the windows of the library where her mother worked, studying the frenetic activity of "the sweatshop, pushcart, solid Jewish, honeycomb tenement district."⁸ The window panes separating Lange from the subjects she viewed served much the same purpose as the camera lenses she used in later years. Lange hid behind them, appeared unobtrusive, and studied tirelessly with her eyes.

Her desire to become part of the environment without drawing attention to herself grew naturally out of her own personal hardships. A victim of polio, Lange walked with a limp, and at her mother's constant urging, the child attempted to conceal it and appear normal. She tried to wrap herself in a "cloak of invisibility," hoping to avoid notice by those around her. Lange would later attempt to do the same when she began photographing, so that her subjects would not be distracted by her presence.⁹ She perfected this method as a child, hiding from the inherent dangers in a poor, urban environment. Walks home through the threatening Bowery section taught her to mask her emotions so she would attract no attention and, therefore, no trouble. The effort helped her to dispel any fears, further

⁸Ibid.

⁹Paul Schuster Taylor, interview by Suzanne Riess, 1970, transcript, Oral History Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; also, Willard Van Dyke, "The Photographs of Dorothea Lange--A Critical Analysis," Camera Craft (October 1934): 464-465.

creating a shield between her and the strangers she encountered. As Lange described it:

I knew how to keep an expression of face that would draw no attention, so no one would look at me....I can turn it on and off. If I don't want anybody to see me I can make the kind of a face so eyes go off me.¹⁰

Even as Lange attempted to keep others from watching her, she continued to watch them. Her short stint in an all-female high school in uptown Manhattan further encouraged the solitary individual in Lange to grow. She had few close friends there and chose to spend more and more of her time outside the institutional walls.¹¹ Lange recalled wandering up and down the streets of the city, watching the people, looking at pictures, sharpening her observational skills. Because she felt that she was developing her artistic sensibilities, Lange defended her recurrent absences from school, claiming that such activity was not "unproductive truancy."¹² Lange managed to graduate from Wadleigh High School, and at her mother's insistence pursued a teaching career by enrolling at the New York Training School for Teachers. Her senses dulled by the educational routine, Lange decided to indulge her visual

¹⁰Lange-Riess interview, 16.

¹¹Karin Becker Ohrn, Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 3.

¹²Lange-Riess interview, 26.

curiosity. A visit to Arnold Genthe's Fifth Avenue studio proved fruitful. He gave her a job and a camera, but, more importantly, he revealed to her his tremendous love for the human individual. Lange learned little about the technique of photography, but much about the art of engaging people before the camera.¹³

Genthe possessed a sense of beauty that his young assistant came to appreciate. Lange observed his interactions with his subjects, most of whom were women, and later described him as "a man who really loved women and understood them."¹⁴ But he was only the first in a long line of teachers and photographers with whom Lange worked or studied. Lange gathered practical information about the photographers' trade from other sources too. In one job, for Armenian portrait photographer Aram Kazanjian, she solicited business by telephone. For another employer, Mrs. A. Spencer-Beatty, Lange became a camera operator. She was responsible for exposing the plates, while others in the studio took care of spotting, printing, and mounting the photographs.¹⁵ Armed with plenty of applicable knowledge, Lange turned her back on assorted part-time jobs and in 1917

¹³Dorothea Lange, Dorothea Lange, introduction by George Elliott (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 105; also, Lange-Riess interview, 27-31.

¹⁴Nat Herz, "Dorothea Lange in Perspective: A Reappraisal of the FSA and an Interview," Infinity (April 1963): 10.

¹⁵Ohrn, Lange and the Documentary Tradition, 4-6.

enrolled in a photography seminar given by Clarence White at Columbia. Upon Genthe's advice she sought to absorb everything White could teach her about the art.

White's influence had already touched a generation of young photographers. Doris Ulmann Jaeger, among others, had listened to his meditations on style and the direction of American photography. Although Lange found the teacher's methods unusual, she learned a great deal from him. She appreciated White's subtle way of getting his message across without criticizing his students' work. She remembered that he "always saw the print in relation to the person...."¹⁶ Though she clung to his words, Lange never completed White's seminar assignments. She drew more from his personal and professional example than she learned in his classroom. Lange considered White an outstanding teacher, if "vague, indefinite. [and] non-didactic...."¹⁷ Perhaps she recognized in White one who shared her love for the visual life. Rarely had Lange found anyone with whom she could claim a common interest. In White she saw "a man who lived a kind of unconscious, instinctive, photographic life."¹⁸ Lange respected his pursuit of photographic excellence, which led her to remark, "I never saw any photo

¹⁶Lange-Riess interview, 39.

¹⁷Herz, "Lange in Perspective," 10.

¹⁸Lange-Riess interview, 42.

of his that had a taint of vulgarity."¹⁹ A few months into White's seminar, Lange knew she wanted to devote her life to pictures. But as she made quite clear in later years, "It was more a sense of personal commitment... [than] a conscious career."²⁰

Convinced that her mind "had made itself up" about photography, Lange set out on a journey to see the world.²¹ In 1918, she left New York City unaware she would never return. She and her travelling companion, Florence Ahlstrom, made their way to New Orleans by boat and from there to the California coast by train. On her first day in San Francisco, Lange was robbed of everything but the change in her pocket. Forced to find employment, she immediately landed a job as a photo-finisher in a store on Market Street. What had first appeared to be an unlucky turn of events proved fortuitous -- across the counter, Lange met a number of well-known photographers, including Imogen Cunningham, Roi Partridge, and photojournalist Consuela Kanaga. Photography curator Joyce Minick later remarked that Lange's employment there was "one of the first instances in her career when time and events were clearly in

¹⁹Herz, "Lange in Perspective," 11.

²⁰Dorothea Lange, interview by Richard K. Doud, 22 May 1964, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²¹Herz, "Lange in Perspective," 10.

her favor."²² At age twenty-three, Lange pushed her painful childhood as a loner to the back of her mind and joined a circle of artists who also happened to be friends.

Not long after she took the Market Street job, Lange received \$3000 to set up her own studio. A friend of a friend provided the financial backing for the young photographer's business on Sutter Street.²³ Roger Sturtevant, Lange's printing assistant, remembered the close-knit group that gathered daily in the studio. He described a gag picture in which Edward Weston and Ann Brigman, posing as parents, held Lange's camera (wrapped in a black photographer's cloth) in their arms. Cunningham and Lange, as the other children, rounded out the "family" portrait.²⁴ Such evidence reveals not only Lange's pleasure in her work but also her comfort among peers. She enjoyed having an open door to her studio, where people gathered day and night. Each afternoon Lange served tea in an effort to attract patrons, but, as she recalled, "by five o'clock that place was full of all kinds of people... [as] everybody brought everybody."²⁵ Like other famous gathering places,

²²Minick's remarks in Therese Thau Heyman, Celebrating a Collection: The Work of Dorothea Lange (Oakland, California: The Oakland Museum, 1978), 9.

²³Lange-Riess interview, 89.

²⁴Roger Sturtevant, interview by Therese Heyman, February 1977, transcript, Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum, Oakland, California.

²⁵Ibid., 7; Lange-Riess interview, 89-90.

such as those on Paris' Left Bank or in New York's Algonquin Hotel, the Lange studio radiated a club atmosphere. Its members, however, actually worked as much as they "talked" about their work. That particular premise guided all the respective talents in the entourage, who easily accepted Sturtevant, a hard-working high school student who was interested in photography. Sturtevant, who was impressed by his friends' work habits, believed they all prospered because they "only believed in working."²⁶ They refused to let politics dominate their craft or popular art trends guide their hands.²⁷

Combining her talent behind the camera with her subtle promotional technique in the salon, Lange developed a large and devoted clientele rather quickly. Her reputation as a portraitist grew as news of her craftsmanship spread by word of mouth. Lange depended upon her wealthy patrons to tell their friends about her photography. Many of them had first seen her work in the Hill Tollerton Print Room that adjoined Lange's studio. The gallery attracted loyal customers who could afford original etchings and prints. They got their first glimpses of the young photographer's pictures on the

²⁶Sturtevant interview, 5.

²⁷Ibid., Sturtevant claimed that the group "didn't have any ism's," unlike the avant-garde photographers living on the East coast. He said that the tension between Lange and Ansel Adams was largely due to the fact that Adams clung to a rigid political agenda. Lange believed this distracted one from creating honest pictures.

gallery's walls. Lange was fortunate to draw support from a such a group, comprised primarily of families willing to spend unlimited amounts of money on portraits. Lange described her rich San Francisco patrons as "large families who knew each other, and had a very strong community sense..., [with] children and education and buildings and pictures, music, [and] philanthropy... [tying] their private personal life and their public life together."²⁸ By an ironic twist, nearly all of Lange's customers were prominent members of San Francisco's Jewish community. As a young child in New York, Lange had stood outside her immigrant classmates' world as a mere observer of what she could not understand. As a highly sought-after professional, she entered the mansions, strolled about the manicured lawns, and befriended the children of her loyal Jewish patrons.²⁹

Employing her invisibility tactics, Lange sought to put her subjects at ease by blending into the surroundings. Richard Conrat, one of Lange's assistants, described her unique approach in trying to capture "the essential person without managing to have her presence felt in the finished

²⁸Lange-Riess interview, 118-119.

²⁹List entitled "Family Photographs, 1920s & 1930s," in Contact Sheets, vol. 1, Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum; the typewritten list includes eight pages of family names who were Lange subjects during her studio years. She served some of the patrons for a number of years, including the Clayburgh family, the Shainwald family, and the Katten family.

photograph."³⁰ Rarely did an individual appear uncomfortable before Lange's camera. She preferred natural poses over stiff, formal ones, so the resulting visual images represented a departure from standard 1920s portraiture. Though beautifully composed, with soft lighting and simple backgrounds, Lange's photographs reveal more realistic views of individual members than family portraits could depict. She preferred not to line up the whole clan, and, according to a friend, Lange even "refused to make portraits of entire families together."³¹

Though the young portraitist's approach seemed cavalier, she always kept in mind the purpose of her business -- to serve the patron first. Lange realized that her personal artistic interpretations took second place to her customers' satisfaction. But she eschewed "pandering to their vanity" and offered, instead, accurate representations of character and personality. Of her portraiture, Lange said:

I was a professional photographer who had a product that was more honest, more truthful.... there was no false front in it. I really and seriously tried, with every person I photographed, to reveal them as closely as I could.... No posturing, no dramatics.³²

³⁰Conrat quoted in Heyman, Celebrating a Collection, 53.

³¹Heyman, Celebrating a Collection, 11.

³²Lange-Riess interview, 92.

This approach helped Lange show the world of the wealthy as an unpretentious one, full of elements common to all human beings.

Lange often pictured her subjects outdoors, thus leaving behind limitations posed by the studio.³³ In the numerous photographs Lange took of the Katten children, most have a background of sunshine and wide-open spaces. The subjects are not posed, nor have they primped for the occasion.³⁴ One of the most widely-accepted misconceptions about Lange's early career suggests that she carried out all of her work inside the studio. Although she started taking portraits there in 1919, within a few years she realized it was just as important to picture individuals within their own environments.³⁵ Lange would continue this practice on a larger scale during the Great Depression, when she expressed a profound desire to picture "a man as he stood in his world."³⁶ But in the Twenties, Lange began exercising her

³³Therese Heyman mentions Lange's initial difficulties upon taking her cameras outside the confines of the studio, but notes that she soon came to see the benefits of working in outdoor light, in Celebrating a Collection, 11.

³⁴See, for example, Contact sheets, vol. 11--"Studio", Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

³⁵Lange kept well-organized records of her portrait jobs. One cost that she frequently figured in was "transportation to the site," which suggests a good deal of work outside the studio. See contact sheets, vols. 1-18 (1920-1934), Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

³⁶Daniel Dixon, "Dorothea Lange," Modern Photography (December 1952): 75.

desire to enter and be welcomed into the various personal worlds of her subjects. Lange's son, Daniel Dixon, highlighted the difference between his mother's indoor and outdoor photography, noting that she concentrated on "detail" inside the studio but was more concerned with a "situation" outside the studio.³⁷

Regardless of the backgrounds, Lange's images reveal very little shift in emphasis. She focussed overwhelmingly on the individual life, using her images to imply that a single human was much more important than anything which surrounded him. Even in the 1930s, when Lange began photographing Depression victims, she concentrated upon the individual man, woman, or child. The human element surpassed mere symbols of financial disaster such as the eroded soil or an empty pocket. The images of Lange's wealthy patrons disclose many of the same characteristics present in later portraits, particularly those "documentary" pictures taken for the federal government. Lange's studio print books reveal hundreds of faces bearing the dignified, almost heroic, look that the photographer captured so well on film.

Appreciative of the single human life, Lange recognized that each harbored a unique set of fears and hopes. Yet her respect for humanity led her to depict inner stability and to downplay external circumstances. The style Lange

³⁷Ibid.

developed early in her studio career is clearly expressed in an undated series of sitters Erika Weber. A couple of poses were taken outdoors, though these offer few clues about the location. In one proof Weber wears a scarf tied around her head as she stands with hands on her hips. An unlikely pose for a rich urbanite, the subject could as easily have been a farmer's wife surveying the year's crop. But the viewer is not allowed to see the ground Weber occupies. Lange peers up at the subject, making her the principal focus while ignoring the immediate environment.³⁸ This stylistic preference helped Lange achieve a certain "look," one that appeared in her early studio work and one that showed up again and again throughout the 1930s. Defining this quality as a certain "tonality" rather than a "style," Lange admitted that particular photographs would lead her to exclaim, 'Well, there's a Lange for you.'³⁹

All the images that she created reflected the aesthetic sense that Lange possessed. Examination of her 1920s studio portraits, her family pictures, and her 1930s farm relief photographs reveals that Lange altered her visual outlook very little, if at all. The period, 1919-1940, was Lange's most active time as a photographer. During those years, according to Therese Heyman, Lange's attitude toward

³⁸Weber series, nos. 555-565, contact sheets, vol. 3--"studio," Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

³⁹Lange-Doud interview, Archives of American Art, p. 4.

pictures "did not change."³⁹ The basic vision she had developed as a young child in New York City endured, though it was augmented by two memorable episodes. While experimenting with landscape photography one summer in the California mountains, Lange was caught in the midst of a raging thunderstorm. She claimed it had a tremendous impact on her life and her career. She realized during those brief, frightening moments that she should devote her attention only to human subjects, that she must "take pictures and concentrate upon people, only people, all kinds of people, people who paid me and people who didn't."⁴⁰ Three years later, at the height of the depression, Lange sat in her studio window watching the unemployed men drift by on the streets while she examined the proof prints of her wealthy sitters. She recalled that "the discrepancy between what I was working on in the printing frames and what was going on up the street was more than I could assimilate."⁴¹ A few months later the view suddenly crystallized. Lange and her husband Maynard Dixon had been to see the Noel Coward movie, "Cavalcade", a story about nineteenth-century Victorian life. As they strolled out of the theatre, newspaper boys walked the streets yelling "EXTRA! EXTRA!" about President Franklin Roosevelt's declaration of

³⁹Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 46.

⁴⁰Dixon, "Dorothea Lange," 73.

⁴¹Herz, "Lange in Perspective," 9.

a bank holiday. Roger Sturtevant remembered that Lange visited him the next day, still "stunned" by her experience. She "had come out at the end of one era and the beginning of another...." He noted that "from then on she became interested in photographing the poor [and] downtrodden."⁴²

Long before economic devastation spread across the United States, Lange began photographing people not blessed by the characteristic abundance of twenties' America. On her summer trips to the southwestern desert, Lange studied the native American inhabitants there, focussing particularly on the Hopi tribe. She enjoyed recording southwestern themes and drew much of her interest in the region from her husband, painter Maynard Dixon. Dixon, a frequent guest at the daily social gatherings in Lange's studio, had married the young photographer in 1920. A carefree temperament and calculated eccentricities made Dixon "a golden boy of the San Francisco bohemian community."⁴³ Though Lange was twenty years younger than her husband, she provided the necessary complement to a man who had an infamous reputation for irresponsible behavior. Lange contributed the serious, more introspective side of the liaison.⁴⁴ Dixon often travelled to the southwest to

⁴²Sturtevant interview, 11, 24.

⁴³Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 12.

⁴⁴Willard Van Dyke, interview by Therese Heyman, May 1977, transcript, Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum. Van Dyke, in remembering Lange's seriousness, mentioned that

revive his artistic self and to dwell on the themes that interested him most -- haunting, spiritual elements indigenous to Indian culture. Though Lange believed her purpose on these trips was to maintain a comfortable environment for her husband, his daughter, and her two young sons, she also managed to satisfy her own artistic curiosity. Lange took her cameras along and began to develop several themes that would distinguish her later work featuring victims of the Great Depression.

Although she experimented on a limited basis with southwestern landscape, Lange believed the native inhabitants were far more interesting subjects. Her documentation of Indian life covered the region around Taos, New Mexico, and northern Arizona. While Dixon looked inward to cultivate his own artistic tastes, Lange spent time exploring the everyday life, rituals, and work habits of the Hopi tribe members. In keeping with her focus on the individual, Lange brought her portrait studio mentality to the wide open spaces of the desert. When she discovered a particularly fascinating subject, she chose to take a series of photographs of the person or scene, thus creating a composite study. Lange's catalogues of negatives reveal the wide range of interests she nurtured during her southwest adventures. She concentrated equally upon mothers,

she constantly centered her conversation around grand themes and visions, to the point that it often became "irritating" in social situations.

children, young men, and village elders. These images of native Americans (taken in the 1920s) are similar in style and content to the pictures she took for the U.S. Government in the mid- to late 1930s. The choice of subjects, the use of light, preferred camera angles, even dominant themes, remain constant throughout the twenty-year period.

A favorite stylistic technique enabled Lange to draw from her subjects expressions of pride and dignity. To achieve the "look" for which she later became famous, Lange crouched down a bit so she could point the camera up at a slight angle. This device, though subtle, infused an image with an easily readable message -- the pictured individual deserved respect since the photographer (and thus the viewer) peered up, rather than down, at him or her. A few of Lange's earliest portraits, dated either "1920s" or "1923-1931", reveal this particular technique. In an experiment with light and dark contrasts, Lange composed a portrait of an adolescent Indian boy shown from torso to head. Though he looks directly into the camera, his head is bent downward to make eye contact with the photographer. In another similar series, Lange on a Hopi man, maintaining her lowered position so that the image appears full of pride and hope. In a closer view of the same subject, the man, who has taken off his shirt, exudes an air of confidence, but

confidence devoid of conceit.⁴⁵ Lange managed early in her career to discern the difference. She was able to isolate and highlight commendable traits, while neglecting the less appealing side of human nature. Perhaps she attempted to find what was exemplary because she believed it existed everywhere and in everyone, regardless of ethnic background or social class or economic constraints. But Lange did not force a formulated vision upon her artistry. Her method resembled Gertrude Stein's attempts to clear her mind before writing a portrait. As Willard Van Dyke pointed out:

Miss Lange's work is motivated by no preconceived photographic aesthetic....For her, making a shot is an adventure that begins with no planned itinerary. She feels that setting out with a preconceived idea of what she wants to photograph actually minimizes her chance for success. Her method is to eradicate from her mind before she starts, all ideas which she might hold regarding the situation--her mind like an unexposed film.⁴⁶

Van Dyke observed this in 1934, when Lange was known only as a portraitist. His glowing praise of her work, combined with his decision to exhibit the photographs in his Oakland studio, gave the public a chance to view Lange's vision of humanity.

Documentary filmmaker Pare Lorentz once said of Lange's work, "You can usually spot any of her portraits because of

⁴⁵Dorothea Lange, Negative catalogues, vol. II, Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

⁴⁶Van Dyke, "Lange--A Critical Analysis," 464.

the terrible reality of her people; in short, she is more interested in people than in photography."⁴⁷ After her life-changing experience in the desert thunderstorm, Lange began advertising her studio work on printed flyers that stated simply, PICTURES OF PEOPLE--DOROTHEA LANGE

PHOTOGRAPHER.⁴⁸ Nothing intrigued her more than the human face. Within the body of Lange's work, no other subject received as much attention. She believed the face spoke a "universal language." Of its unique ability, Lange said:

The same expressions are readable, understandable all over the world. It is the only language... that is really universal. It's [sic] sad, shades of meaning, it's [sic] explosions of emotion and passion...I'll concentrate on just this part of the human anatomy where a slight twinge of a few muscles...runs the gamut of that person's potential.⁴⁹

From her earliest years as a portrait photographer, Lange viewed sanguine, unhappy, angry, hopeful, and contemplative faces, capturing on film the wide spectrum of expressions arising from the human condition. Two notable studies composed on one of her southwest journeys reveal Lange's unique ability to extract meaning from a face and record it.

⁴⁷Lorentz published his observation in the 1941 U.S. Camera Annual, here quoted in Edna Bennett, "Dorothea Lange: A Timely Tribute," Photographic Product News 2 (January/February 1966): 56.

⁴⁸Ohrn, Lange and the Documentary Tradition, 22; also, Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 16.

⁴⁹NET Soundtrack interviews, 87.

In one photograph the surrounding darkness frames the face of a native American woman lost deep in thought. Because her head is covered, even more attention is directed toward her facial features and the contemplative expression they form.⁵⁰ In the second study, a series of an ancient man wrapped in a blanket, Lange used light to illuminate the signs of age on the Indian's face. A wrinkled jowl in profile shows the desert sun's parching effects after several decades spent in its heat. In another image within the same study, Lange pointed her camera directly at the old man, who had turned his eyes away from her to stare off into the distance.⁵¹ Rarely capturing a superficial smile, Lange preferred to record her subjects' true emotions. She chose not to manipulate her sitters' feelings, and, as a result, her photographs possessed a genuineness not often found in other portraiture. Critic George Elliott pointed out that Lange often pictured a troubled face, yet she managed never to overdo it. He said, "Again and again she redeems these pictures from sentimentality by the honesty and clarity of her seeing."⁵² Realizing that the face often served as a mask, Lange rigorously trained herself to

⁵⁰#80.103.147, Lange negative catalogues, vol. II, Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

⁵¹#80.103.168-172, Lange negative catalogues, vol. II, Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

⁵²George P. Elliott, "Photographs and Photographers," in A Piece of Lettuce (New York: Random House, 1964), 97.

see through the false fronts people erected. In living a visual life, she absorbed as much human action and reaction as she could see around her and through her studio windows. This intense observation helped Lange determine what moments would be most meaningful to capture on film. She strived to make it become second nature to her, so that she could automatically recognize those scenes or those faces that would provide images of substance. The more she delved into her work and exercised her power of seeing, the easier it became for Lange to find significance in the smallest things. Reflecting upon her own pursuit of the visual life, Lange described the nature of the process, noting that a photographer should be:

...constantly and continually training his power of vision, deliberately training his visual memory, so he actually knows things...he trains his vision to know what he is looking at. This is on the material side. He also trains his vision as accurately as he can, not to interpret, interpret, interpret, interpret in terms of what he guesses is the situation. He looks at it, he looks into it, he hangs around, he finds out visually...he puts the camera around his neck in the morning along with his shoes, and there it is, an appendage on his body, and it shares his life. He doesn't have to do developing, he doesn't have to do printing, but he has to see...53

Lange believed that a photographer could allow a viewer to look at a picture of something commonplace and find some extraordinary quality in it. The photographer, then, as

53NET Soundtrack interviews, 272.

facilitator, helped the viewer eradicate mental walls, rethink misconceived ideas, and sharpen dulled senses. Insisting that a photographer always keep the potential viewer in mind, Lange articulated the desired results. Of the viewer who saw her pictures, she said:

My hope would be that he would say to himself, 'oh yea, I know what she meant. I never thought of it, I never paid attention to it.' Or something like 'I've seen that a thousand times.' But he won't miss it again....You have added to your viewer's confidence or his understanding...⁵⁴

Photo historian Anne Tucker has described Lange's intent as "gentle," noting, "She did not want to introduce, but to remind us of things."⁵⁵ Lange made the viewer an important participant in her creative endeavor, but she rarely, if ever, altered a scene to please her public. She judiciously guarded her artistic integrity.

Even as a young photographer, Lange realized that what seemed ordinary to others appeared extraordinary to her. By translating her world view onto film, she was able to share this sentiment. Although the characters in her photographs often appear grand, they always retain their connection to reality. Lange, who continuously strove for honest representation, forged no myth-like characters of fiction. In an essay appropriately titled, "Photographing the

⁵⁴Ibid., 255.

⁵⁵Anne Tucker, ed., The Woman's Eye (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 5.

Familiar," Lange argued that the world untouched provided the best subjects for the camera. "Bad as it is," she explained, "the world is potentially full of good photographs. But to be good, photographs have to be full of the world."⁵⁶ In the early twenties, Lange tacked a quotation to her darkroom door. For the next forty years, she adhered to those words written by Francis Bacon:

The contemplation of things as they are
Without error or confusion
Without substitution or imposture
Is in itself a nobler thing
Than a whole harvest of invention.⁵⁷

Loyal to her aesthetic convictions, Lange once said, "It is the nature of the camera to deal with what is."⁵⁸

When asked about her approach to photography, Lange told an interviewer that she preferred not to "reconstruct reality." She believed that alternate visions were acceptable for other photographers, but she leaned toward unmanipulated images. Defending her choice, Lange stated, "The clever man is very different from the gifted man."⁵⁹

⁵⁶Dorothea Lange with Daniel Dixon, "Photographing the Familiar," Aperture I (1952): 4-15, reprinted in Photographers on Photography, ed. Nathan Lyons, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 70.

⁵⁷Ohrn, Lange and the Documentary Tradition, xvii; also, introductory comments by George Elliott in Lange, Dorothea Lange.

⁵⁸Lange, "Photographing the Familiar," 72.

⁵⁹Herz, "Lange in Perspective," 10.

She once explained that the few people who possessed a "sense of time" could relate to the larger world what they saw within their own visual scope. These people, conscious of time, used "an innate historical sense" to make valuable contributions to the society at large. In Lange's estimation, the person who had a sense of time was the polar opposite of one who enjoyed a sense of humor, since the latter could relate nothing he observed to anything else.⁶⁰ The clever man arranged and rearranged so as to create illusion or elicit response; the gifted man used what existed to reveal beauty or clarify reality.

Taking things as they were, Lange became known in the 1930s as a documentarian. She always felt uncomfortable with the label and abhorred document as a descriptive term for her pictures. She thought it sounded "too cold for the kind of empathetic record she tried to create."⁶¹ If the semantics failed to please her, Lange nevertheless understood the methodology. Late in her life, she attempted to explain the approach of a documentary photographer. In her example, she described an aesthetically-pleasing scene marred only by the presence of old rusty cans:

60NET Soundtrack interviews, 38.

61Ohrn, Lange and the Documentary Tradition, 35. Ohrn notes that Lange and photo historian Beaumont Newhall attempted for years to find a more appropriate name for the genre than "documentary" but never found one to satisfy them.

It's two tin cans down there....The man with a certain kind of training will never remove those two cans and the other man must....These wretched little cans...you accept it.⁶²

Lange accepted the commonplace, the everyday, and recorded it. George Elliott noted, "When Dorothea Lange looks into a camera, she does not, as many do, find forms abstracted from meaning....Nor is her primary purpose to arrange recognizable objects into formally pleasing patterns."⁶³ Elliott's assessment placed Lange's work squarely within a photographic tradition that grew increasingly popular in the 1930s.

British film critic John Grierson, who in 1926 coined the term "documentary" in describing films, argued that they "should educate and persuade," not merely chronicle reality.⁶⁴ Though Lange probably never heard of Grierson, her pictures nonetheless satisfied the simple requirements he had articulated. She recorded reality, but she also created visual images that spoke to a viewer's conscience and intellect. Lange believed that her deeply personal experience and struggle with the Great Depression and its victims led her into documentary photography, though she

⁶²NET Soundtrack interviews, 25.

⁶³Introductory comments by Elliott in Lange, Dorothea Lange, 11.

⁶⁴Anne Wilkes Tucker, "Photographic Facts and Thirties America," in Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography, ed. David Featherstone (Carmel, California: Friends of Photography, 1984), 41-42.

claimed to have practiced a style which "at that time...[had] no name."⁶⁵ Years before the term gained popularity and well before the Depression, Lange cultivated the photographic vision and accompanying technique necessary for shaping solid documents. Human subjects had always been the most important to Lange, and they continued to draw her full attention. Only her outward circumstances changed, as she and her husband and countless other Americans found themselves unemployed and hungry.

In a household solely dependent upon photography and art, Lange and Dixon suffered their own hardships in the Depression. To make the most of a difficult financial situation, they gave up their home and put their two sons, Daniel and John, in boarding school. The couple opted to live separately in their respective studios. Lange and Dixon chose a route rather common to San Francisco artists affected by the Depression. Roger Sturtevant recalled that "all the people who had studios and a house in those days moved into their studios for the time being...."⁶⁶ Alone in her Montgomery Street studio, Lange perhaps found more time to contemplate her own situation while she stared out the windows at unemployed passersby. Street life seemed to be dividing her concentration. Though Lange neither wanted nor could afford to turn away from her wealthy patrons, she felt

⁶⁵Lange-Riess interview, 146.

⁶⁶Sturtevant interview, 15.

the outside world pulling at her. Of this need, she said, "I was compelled to photograph as a direct response to what was around me.... I was driven by the fact that I was under personal turmoil to do something."⁶⁷ So Lange decided to return to the streets, to observe the people there just as she had done as a child in New York City. This time, though, she carried a camera with her. On her first trip out among the unemployed, Lange managed to capture an image that would become an icon of the worst Depression years. Neglecting her friends' warnings to stay away from areas where desperate victims congregated, Lange ventured over to a breadline set up by a wealthy San Franciscan called the "White Angel."⁶⁸ Among the hungry crowd Lange saw a man who had turned away from the rest and barely held onto his empty tin cup. The subject of her first "street" photograph, this man in dishevelled clothing and a ragged hat provided the substance Lange had been searching for. Of the experience, Lange remembered:

I knew I was looking at something. You know there are moments such as these when time stands still and all you do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you. And you just hope you will have enough time to get it organized in a fraction of a second on that tiny piece of sensitive film. Sometimes you have an inner sense that you have

⁶⁷Lange-Riess interview, 145, 147.

⁶⁸Lange-Doud interview, 5; also, Cox, Dorothea Lange (Aperture), 8.

encompassed the thing generally.⁶⁹

What Lange had found fulfilled her need to answer the Depression, to react against a horrid economy that had taken her children away from her. But the "White Angel" Breadline print represented much more. It was Lange's reacquaintance with street life, and a rekindling of her own memories of a dismal childhood spent on the Lower East Side. The image, doubtless autobiographical, reveals a man turned against the flow of the crowd -- at once unique, even exceptional, yet despondent and alone. Perhaps Lange saw in this man's circumstance an accurate, if uneasy, parallel of her own experience. Moved by those few minutes at the breadline, Lange developed the film the next day and immediately hung the print in her studio. She even bridged the distance to her long-neglected East Coast home by sending the print to a gallery in New York City. Edward Steichen, a highly-regarded photographer and critic, was astounded when he viewed the Lange picture. As Roger Sturtevant remembered, "Steichen saw it and everything else in this exhibit was wiped out as far as [he] was concerned. This man with the tin cup... this was real photography and this was the essence of what photographers should be doing."⁷⁰ A representative image, "White Angel" Breadline helped open

⁶⁹Herz, "Lange in Perspective," 9.

⁷⁰Sturtevant interview, 11.

Lange's eyes to new possibilities for her career, while encouraging her to examine the very personal reasons behind her use of the camera.

Lange realized that her pictures, even her earlier portraits of the rich, revealed as much about who stood behind the camera as about who sat in front of it. She once wrote, "A photographer's files are in a sense his autobiography.... As fragmentary and incomplete as an archaeologist's potsherds, they can be no less telling."⁷¹ She further expressed this sentiment when she wrote specifically of the photographer's craft:

Rather than acknowledge, he embraces; rather than perform, he responds. Moving in a world so much composed of himself, he cannot help but express himself. Every image he sees, every photograph he takes, becomes in a sense a self-portrait.⁷²

Lange admitted enjoying every portrait she had made "in an individual way," but, by 1933, she sought something grander.⁷³ She never wanted to abandon her wealthy patrons, but she yearned to explore what she called the "bigger canvas out there."⁷⁴ Despite her exciting initiation on the

⁷¹Arthur Goldsmith, "Harvest of Truth: The Dorothea Lange Retrospective Exhibition," Infinity (March 1966): 30.

⁷²Lange, "Photographing the Familiar," 71.

⁷³Lange-Doud interview, 3.

⁷⁴Herz, "Lange in Perspective," 10; also, Sturtevant interview, 24.

streets of San Francisco, Lange chose to continue studio portraiture so she could eat and pay her sons' board. Money from the portraits also allowed her to finance the "other" photography. She soon realized, however, that doing both kinds of work was "a strain."⁷⁵

General unrest over her work and her personal life marked the beginning of a transition for Lange. Her initiation into street photography sparked a long-dormant political conscience. Strikes on San Francisco's waterfront and other worker demonstrations encouraged Lange to take her camera into highly-charged, often violent, situations. Sturtevant recalled that until then Lange had entertained no political interests, even though she later claimed to have regarded former President Woodrow Wilson with "great respect."⁷⁶ As Lange became more politically aware, she realized that her newfound subject matter offered exciting options. These were accompanied, unfortunately, by a whole new set of problems, questions, and concerns.

Warnings from Lange's friends were minor compared to the arguments her husband made against her new interests. Dixon looked skeptically upon political affiliations and loyalties, and he dissuaded his wife from attending party gatherings. Lange, who was sought out by left-wing groups, believed in their value, and said of them, "I'm not sure

⁷⁵Lange-Riess interview, 152.

⁷⁶Sturtevant interview, 24; Lange-Riess interview, 58.

that it wasn't the right thing to do...participating in groups of people who were ready to take action."⁷⁷ Spurred on by a fresh sense of social responsibility, Lange continued to pursue subjects outside her studio. The distance separating Lange and Dixon increased as their respective artistic philosophies took divergent paths. Dixon clung tenaciously to an aesthetic standard that praised art for its own sake, whereas Lange felt that her photography could serve a larger purpose for the cause of humanity. She sensed a deeper connection to her surroundings than her husband did. Though not about Dixon specifically, Lange once noted that an "artist" photographer maintained only a "very slight...alliance with the world."⁷⁸ Perhaps this is the reason she felt more comfortable working on the west coast, away from her native New York City and its artists' colonies. Lange's friend, Willard Van Dyke, offered similar sentiments:

One of the pervading things underneath was a feeling that the Eastern photographic establishment was too theoretical...too parochial--they couldn't see anything except their own little worlds...⁷⁹

⁷⁷Lange-Riess interview, 152.

⁷⁸NET Soundtrack interviews, 42.

⁷⁹Van Dyke interview, 14.

Lange, no doubt, began to realize the importance of her photography to the society at large, though she received little encouragement from her artist husband. Therese Heyman, curator of the Lange Collection at the Oakland Museum, has discussed the differences between Lange's and Dixon's work in those crucial months:

In her 1934 photographs, Lange was an articulate witness to the most stubborn and intractable truths of her time--the possibility of civil insurrection. She made memorable images, partly eulogistic, partly despairing as in 'White Angel Breadline,' but unlike Dixon, the rebellion is never out of control. Dixon's visions are suffused with fear; Lange's, on the other hand, are confident and human.⁸⁰

Even if her photographs exuded confidence, Lange remained unsure about forging ahead in a new direction. Within the year, though, she had received the necessary boosts of assurance from two reputable sources.

Gallery owner Willard Van Dyke put up a Lange exhibition in his Oakland studio in 1934. Comparing Lange's talents and pictures to those of Civil War photographer Mathew Brady, Van Dyke said in his commentary, "Both Lange and Brady share the passionate desire to show posterity the mixture of futility and hope, of heroism and stupidity, greatness and banality that are the concomitants of man's

⁸⁰Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 52. Also, author's conversations with Therese Heyman, Oakland, California, 12 July 1989.

struggle forward."⁸¹ Attempting to prove his point, Van Dyke showed the public Lange's images of hungry breadseekers, angry May Day demonstrators, impassioned union spokesmen, and determined strikers. One viewer impressed by what he saw was University of California economist Paul Taylor. He had been gathering information on labor by carrying out his research "in the field." An assistant praised Taylor's approach, noting that "Paul was always out there finding out what was really happening while others played around with their theoretical models and ran their regression analyses."⁸² Part of Taylor's hands-on methodology included the use of photographs. He realized immediately the breadth of Lange's talent and her vision. Within a few months, the two were working side by side for the State Emergency Relief Administration in California.

Paul Taylor helped Lange gain the confidence she needed to continue photographing in the outside world among the anonymous unemployed poor. Though she had always energetically pursued her visual interests, Lange lost a fraction of her verve when Dixon failed to confirm her politically-inspired work. His opposition created doubts in Lange's mind. It was perhaps the first time she had felt a sense of uneasiness since those days spent walking past the

⁸¹Van Dyke, "Lange--A Critical Analysis," 467.

⁸²Clark Kerr, quoted in Paul Taylor, On the Ground in the Thirties (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1983), viii.

drunks on the Bowery. She sought approval for her pictures. Recognizing Lange's apprehensions, Van Dyke noted the impact of Paul Taylor's support on the government's newest employee. Van Dyke said that Lange was seeking "validation for an approach that she was struggling with as far as this photography was concerned. And Paul gave it."⁸³ Within a brief time, the professional collaboration expanded to include a personal relationship between the two. In spite of their respective marriages, Lange and Taylor found their own liaison a necessary complement to their work. Taylor recognized the possibilities upon "their first encounter" and said of it, "'Attraction and accomplishment met.'"⁸⁴ Van Dyke identified the connection between Lange and Taylor as "a meeting of minds and souls."⁸⁵ Lange matched the support Taylor offered. When she finally asked Dixon for a divorce in 1935, she explained. "I want to marry Paul, he needs me."⁸⁶ Forfeiting her life with the wild-natured, often unpredictable, artist, Lange cast her future with a man who was the personification of solid, respectable citizenship.

⁸³Van Dyke interview, 11.

⁸⁴Taylor, quoted in Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 57.

⁸⁵Van Dyke interview, 12.

⁸⁶Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 16.

Of the Lange-Taylor union, Therese Heyman has said, "Marrying was completing the arrangement, it would seem."⁸⁷ In a professional sense, both the photographer and the economist felt that their complete devotion to each other would further strengthen the work they were doing. Even before the marriage, Lange had accompanied Taylor on several field trips throughout the state. But in 1935 she closed her San Francisco studio for good and decided to spend all her energy combining her photographic talents with Taylor's word skills. Lange believed one was incomplete without the other. Words helped explain pictures. The visual illuminated the verbal. Lange recognized the inherent weakness of photography, the act of taking a small piece out of reality. She noted, "When you take it out and isolate it, a good deal falls through the slot."⁸⁸ As an example, Lange described the life of one particular woman depicted in a photograph. The viewer may see the woman in the picture but will never see all the things that surround her and influence her life. As the photographer, Lange experienced what she termed a "visual flood," but knowing that her viewer would not have the same opportunity, she asked disconcertingly, "How can you put that...so somebody else will understand it?"⁸⁹ Lange felt that Taylor's words

⁸⁷Ibid., 57.

⁸⁸NET Soundtrack interviews, 75.

⁸⁹Ibid.

would help bridge those gaps and would complete her pictures.

This combination of visual and written sources gained popularity among socially-conscious artists and others during the Depression. The resulting work, labelled "documentary," sought to inform but also to persuade. A photograph had the capacity to reach millions through the popular press. If the picture had no caption, the viewer could interpret for himself; but if the right message was attached, the viewer's opinion could be molded, crystallized, even changed completely. Of Lange, one critic said, "[she] probed deep into humanity to come up with fragments of life that pulled the heart strings of all that could open their eyes to see."⁹⁰ But Lange knew that most people did not actually see; they merely glanced. Words, then, were necessary to augment the average person's visual acumen. Lange told an interviewer:

There's hardly anything that I've done that couldn't be enhanced and fortified by the right kind of comment.... All photographs...can be fortified by words.⁹¹

The words Taylor wrote to accompany Lange's photographs came directly from the notes he took during field research.

⁹⁰Robert J. Doherty, Jr., "USA-FSA: Farm Security Administration Photographs of the Depression Era," Camera 41 (October 1962), 10.

⁹¹Lange-Riess interview. 204-205.

Since he was trained as a scientist, objectivity played a vital role in his choice of evidence. Both Taylor and Lange abhorred "poetic captions," favoring, instead, honest descriptions of the circumstances they had studied. One contemporary critic has said that Taylor's captions "have the virtues of being interesting in their diversity and being factual descriptions or transcriptions rather than fabrications."⁹² When Lange distinguished between her 1930s work and the photographs taken by Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine decades earlier, she noted, "The documentary thing is a little different because it's filed and cross-filed in its pure state, and it's buttressed by written material and by all manner of things which keep it unified and solid."⁹³ In Lange's opinion Hine and Riis had not produced documentary work, since both men considered words subordinate to the visual image. Lange agreed with her friend Willard Van Dyke, who later declared, "Words at that point were so important...there was so much to be said. Our feelings were so strong about the Depression that just to show a picture just wasn't point enough."⁹⁴

The New Deal government hoped to achieve a number of its objectives through use of the word/picture combination.

⁹²John Rogers Puckett, Five Photo-Textual Documentaries from the Great Depression, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 91.

⁹³Lange-Riess interview, 155.

⁹⁴Van Dyke interview, 3.

In 1935 a new federal agency, the Resettlement Administration, assumed the task of aiding those hit hardest by the Depression -- rural Americans. Since the RA's proposed plans to help farmers, sharecroppers, and migrant laborers seemed a bit radical, even socialistic, to conservative Americans and their Congressmen, an Information Division took on the responsibility of "selling" the agency to the public.⁹⁵ The head of this division, Roy Stryker, considered photography the most appropriate and expedient vehicle for increasing support. Since "picture" magazines, such as Fortune, Look, and Camera, were flourishing, Stryker knew he could get the RA's photographs published nationwide.⁹⁶ He hired several talented people to take the pictures, including Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange, all artists in some sense. Lange had made her reputation as a portraitist, Shahn as a muralist, and Evans as an art photographer. Stryker acknowledged their artistic backgrounds, even felt they would provide a balance for this otherwise scientific survey of economic conditions. As a close student of John Dewey's philosophies, Stryker sought to combine art and science in order to appeal to the culture-at-large. As historian Maren

⁹⁵Sidney Baldwin, Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 117.

⁹⁶James C. Anderson, ed., Roy Stryker: The Humane Propagandist (Louisville, Ky.: University of Louisville Photographic Archives, 1977), 4.

Stange has pointed out, "The goal of social publicity was...to portray social and economic management as a matter of smooth, humane, bureaucratic administration."⁹⁷ Having worked with the New Deal's Federal Emergency Relief Administration in California, Lange understood her role as a government propagandist within the bureaucracy. As she later explained, "The harder and more deeply you believe in anything, the more in a sense you're a propagandist. Conviction, propaganda, faith."⁹⁸ Her pictures, reinforced by words, revealed Lange's commitment. They served to convince as well as captivate the American public.

In her work for the Resettlement Administration, Lange dwelt on the same themes she had focussed upon in the 1920s and the early 1930s. Her government photographs, taken from 1935 to 1938, reveal that Lange's primary visual interests, her artistic outlook, and her style changed very little. She admitted to an interviewer:

I go over some of the things...done in this Sutter Street period and I see plainly that I'm exactly the same person, doing the same things in different forms, saying the same things. It's amusing sometimes...to look at my own early endeavors and [say], 'There she is, there she is again!' It's built-in. Some

⁹⁷Maren Stange, "The Management of Vision: Rexford Tugwell and Roy Stryker in the 1920s," *Afterimage* 15 (March 1988): 6. For Stange, Stryker's training at Columbia University in the 1920s was a rehearsal for his job with the RA in the 1930s.

⁹⁸Lange-Riess interview, 181.

things are built in.⁹⁹

The photographs Lange took for the RA built her a solid reputation as a documentarian. The desperate yet dignified faces of the Great Depression caught her eye, and she recorded economic hardship and personal character simultaneously, creating an inextricable combination. Therese Heyman has said of Lange's RA photographs, "Everyone in the pictures has character.... And yet... few are simple. Her people have an emotional complexity, an ambiguity which breaks stereotype and makes us look again."¹⁰⁰ This is exactly what the RA hoped to accomplish -- to make viewers look again, a second, third, even fourth time. The agency wanted to portray farmers, migrant laborers, and displaced dust-bowl victims, as ordinary Americans, faith intact, who had the stamina to survive simply because they were Americans. Lange fell in line with these goals and helped to mold the RA vision in its initial years. But by the late thirties, the RA, then renamed the Farm Security Administration, had shifted its objectives and its vision. The facets of Lange's work that had made it so compelling, so appropriate for the RA in the mid-thirties, made it obsolete by the end of the decade. For the last year of her stint with the RA/FSA, Lange struggled with Stryker over her

⁹⁹Lange-Riess interview, 215.

¹⁰⁰Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 80; also, author's conversations with Heyman, Oakland, July 1989.

approach, her loyalties, and her handling of negatives. She insisted on keeping her own negatives to see how her work was taking shape. Stryker demanded that she send them immediately from the field to the Washington office. After two rather stormy years, Stryker finally released Lange in 1939.¹⁰¹ Her signature style, and its accompanying themes, had been surpassed by fresher ideas coming from new directions.

The corpus of Lange's work in the twenties and thirties reflected both her own personal experiences and prevailing cultural attitudes in the United States. If one theme pervades her pictures, it is the importance of the human individual. Lange had matured in an America that revered the strength of the individual, making one's own way, regardless of the costs. Dependence on others was simply an admittance of cowardice or laziness. From her childhood days Lange had developed a psychological stamina, an inner source of strength. One of her cousins pointed out that Lange was "tougher than any of the ones in our family. She had a much better sense of where she was going and nothing was going to stop her."¹⁰² Lange believed that potential for personal fortitude resided within everyone, and that it

¹⁰¹Stryker-Lange correspondence, 1935-1939, Roy Emerson Stryker Papers, microfilm edition, University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Louisville, Ky.

¹⁰²David Lange, interview by Therese Heyman, 15 February 1978, transcript, Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

came to the front when circumstances demanded it. She spent her career as a photographer recording this strength, depicting human dignity as she saw it. Lange interpreted her vision of life in America by focussing on one person at a time.

The photographer's search for character most often ended with the picture of a face. Lange thought that faces, more than anything else, could explain the nature of reality. Man himself, rather than his buildings, his landscapes, or his destruction, best represented what was real. No doubt her years as a portraitist convinced Lange that a face was the most vital subject a photographer could record. The bulk of her work for the RA reveals thousands of faces, some full of hope, others despair, but always infused with personal dignity. Heyman has noted that these pictures seem to say, "This is America, We Are Americans, and We'll Make It."¹⁰³ Politically-liberal critics, including a few New Dealers, attacked Lange's work, arguing that the people in her photographs appeared strong enough to need little government help and patriotic enough to keep from inciting rebellion over their horrible living conditions. Lange's pictures, in their opinion, showed courageous, hopeful Americans, not pathetic, downtrodden derelicts.¹⁰⁴ Although she believed in the New Deal, its

¹⁰³Heyman, Celebrating A Collection, 47.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

programs and solutions, Lange drew most often from her own passion and personal experience in relating to the people around her. She thought their faces provided the most significant visual records, but she also considered their words a powerful addition to the chronicle.

Of all the field photographers Stryker employed, Lange wrote the longest captions. These rarely contained her personal interpretations, since she relied upon her eyes and the camera for that. She chose, instead, to record the exact words her subjects uttered, and she sent to Washington "verbatim accounts to accompany her photographs."¹⁰⁵ Her husband, who remembered that Lange carried a loose-leaf notebook for such purposes, claimed that she carefully practiced "using her ear as well as her eye."¹⁰⁶ Taylor wielded a great deal of influence in this area, since he had accompanied Lange on several field assignments and had interviewed folks while Lange photographed them. Perhaps the best-known Lange image that includes Taylor conducting an interview was taken in Clarksdale, Mississippi. A husky plantation owner, with foot propped on his new automobile, converses with Taylor as four black men sit quietly in the background. The RA editors cropped Taylor out of the picture for their purposes, even though the original negative shows him prominently. When Archibald MacLeish

¹⁰⁵Ohrn, Lange and the Documentary Tradition, 75.

¹⁰⁶Taylor-Riess interview, 132.

used the photo in his 1938 publication, Land of the Free. he further cut the picture, leaving the black men out. MacLeish juxtaposed the plantation owner image against his own poetry, which included the words "freedom," "American," and "pioneers." The irony of the verbal message placed beside the original photograph would have been too overwhelming for the Jim Crow South, so MacLeish eliminated the potentially confusing combination. Since Lange's picture belonged to the federal government, which had sole control over its use and distribution, her thorough captions could be changed, deleted, or ignored altogether. Anyone could attach his own words for his own purposes.¹⁰⁷ By doing this to Lange's photographs, one destroyed the photographer's original intention, which was to create "documents that were both visual and verbal."¹⁰⁸

Lange's attention to faces and her devotion to accompanying words were matched by a desire to capture what was thoroughly American. Her expression of this idea reveals itself most clearly in her photographs of movement

¹⁰⁷A thoughtful discussion of the words as supplementary material to photographs is Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s," in Documenting America, 1935-1943, ed. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 15-42. In Five Photo-Textual Documentaries from the Great Depression, John Rogers Puckett describes MacLeish's work as "a flabby poem...its language unequal to the photographs it accompanies." (p. 48).

¹⁰⁸Ohrn, Lange and the Documentary Tradition. 75.

or travel. In a larger sense, this recurring theme in Lange's work could be defined as the American obsession with mobility. Lange captured figures walking along the highways, relaxing in overstuffed jalopies, and dwelling in makeshift shelters. Many of her RA pictures were taken before government efforts had effectively addressed the small farmers' problems, when thousands were moving--away from tired soil or dust-filled houses and toward fresh land and new prosperity. The hope inherent in mobility was that a better future lay ahead. The idea had long been a part of the American conscience. Freedom to move was viewed as an opportunity and a privilege in the culture. As early as the 1830s, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, had identified this cultural peculiarity. He believed that Americans possessed an anxious nature, a driving quality, that kept them constantly uprooting themselves in search of better lives. In the years just prior to the Civil War, the threat to mobility affected both northerners and southerners. Historian Eric Foner has pointed out the concern of northern Americans in the 1850s to preserve western lands as places they could move to and he afforded the privilege of a familiar lifestyle -- one of "free soil and free labor."¹⁰⁹ Southerners thought along similar lines. James Oakes, who has turned traditional perceptions

¹⁰⁹Eric Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

about the South upside down, has shown that transience was "a normal part of existence in the Old South." The great majority of antebellum slaveholders had not sunk their roots into the soil, nor had they lived on plantations for generations with grandparents, parents, and their own children. Instead, most southerners were migrants. Women "complained that their husbands and children seemed determined to move every time they got the chance. Success seemed as much an excuse for packing up and leaving as did failure."¹¹⁰ In the 1930s nearly every excuse for moving was tied to failure, and Lange photographed Americans who were on the road in search of a better and more prosperous life. A number of telling images Lange created for the RA were later published in a book she and T aylor aptly titled An American Exodus.

The idea of a restless nature in Americans had appealed to Lange even in her early years as a photographer. In her pictures of the Southwestern Indians, Lange frequently depicted men and women on horseback, turned away, riding out across the desert.¹¹¹ She photographed family members perched on wagons or walking alongside.¹¹² The images were

¹¹⁰James Oakes, The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders (New York: Random House, 1982).

¹¹¹See especially Vol. II, Negative Catalogues, Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

¹¹²Contact Sheets, "Southwest 1920s & 1930s," Lange Collection, Oakland Museum.

strikingly similar to those she created later for the RA. Cultural historian William Jordy has connected Lange's depiction of mobility with the regional fervor that gained popularity in the 1930s. He sees the jalopy as an important symbol of the age, one akin to the wagon train headed west in the nineteenth century. Jordy believes that Lange's pictures of mobility, specifically those of the Okies going west, imitated "the saga of earlier pioneers."¹¹³ For all of their appeal in the mid-1930s, these kinds of photographs grew increasingly less popular at the RA/FSA office by the late thirties. Stryker's other photographers, especially Russell Lee and Marion Post, were concentrating upon the small town, the community, and the stability offered within these comfortable confines.¹¹⁴ The idea of mobility, which Lange had viewed as an individual's option, an example of personal strength and courage, diminished as an American value. Community effort and group support surpassed it. These ideas remained foreign to Lange.

¹¹³William H. Jordy, "Four Approaches to Regionalism in the Visual Arts of the 1930s," in The Study of American Culture: Contemporary Conflicts, ed. Luther S. Luedtke. (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1977), 19-48.

¹¹⁴Lee and Post, the FSA's most productive photographers from 1938 to 1941, spent weeks at a time studying single communities and their activities. See Photograph Files of the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Since Lange attempted to portray the independent individual, she rarely depicted the intimacy of human relations. As adept as she was at getting people to cooperate with her, Lange seldom photographed them interacting with each other. More often than not, members of a group or family share little or no contact. Lange, who found it difficult to photograph her own family, once said that photographers had rarely probed the intimacy within the human family, because the "intense alliance" could not be adequately recorded.¹¹⁵ No image better illuminates this opinion than Lange's most famous photograph, "Migrant Mother." Even though the mother's children surround her, touching her on all sides, she is separated from them by her thoughts and her faraway gaze. The children are merely appendages to the primary subject, the woman. Photo historian John Rogers Puckett, who believes the image indicative of the entire Lange oeuvre, has said, "Like many Lange photographs... [Migrant Mother] depicts a moment of withdrawal into self -- of isolation and alienation from the world. The theme of human estrangement runs through all of Lange's work."¹¹⁶ A very personal reflection of her own life, Lange revealed this isolation as a common thread in human existence. Critic George Elliott identified the "Migrant Mother" as "a sort of anti-Madonna and Child...."

¹¹⁵NET Soundtrack interviews, 252-253.

¹¹⁶Puckett, Five Photo-Textual Documentaries, 105.

The mother, who, we feel without reservation, wants to love and cherish her children, even as they lean on her, is severed from them by her anxiety."¹¹⁷ Historian James Curtis, who has conducted the most thorough study on the "Migrant Mother" series of photographs, discusses Lange's conscious arrangement of the composition. In her notebook Lange recorded that the woman had seven children, yet only four are present in the pictures. Curtis suggests that Lange did not want several more people in the photograph, since "five figures posed enough of an obstacle."¹¹⁸ Lange even positioned the children to achieve the desired effect. Curtis notes:

She had the youngsters place their heads on their mother's shoulders but turn their backs to the camera. In this way Lange avoided any problem of competing countenances and any exchanged glances that might produce unwanted effects. She was free to concentrate exclusively on her main subject.¹¹⁹

Lange's decision to focus on the separate individual -- one man, one woman, or one child -- helped her avoid the complexities of human exchange. This can be seen in numerous other photographs, highlighting a wide range of

¹¹⁷Elliott, "Photographs and Photographers." in A Piece of Lettuce, 97.

¹¹⁸James Curtis, Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 52.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 65.

subjects. In one picture a nursing mother holds her child, who has turned completely away, as if detached from his very source of life and nourishment. The mother, likewise, offers the child no attention. In Lange's 1938 study of displaced tenant farmers in Hardeman County, Texas, she pictured six men standing outside a house. Though all are in the same predicament, unemployed and disenfranchised, they remain separate from each other, neither looking at nor talking to one another. Lange made an interesting observation about her penchant for seeking out individuals among the masses. Describing a photograph she took at the Richmond shipyards during the war, she said:

The shipyard workers were coming down steps... it was a mass of humanity.... There the jobs were and everybody got a job.... But what made the photograph so interesting was that they were all looking in different directions. There was no focus, there was no cohesion in this group. They were not a group of people united on a job. It showed so plainly. Their eyes were all over.120

Lange understood the importance of being independent. Forced to become self-reliant at an early age, she always felt sympathy, even empathy, for individuals struggling against the outside world. Although she and Doris Ulmann both preferred to focus on the singular human, Lange brought to her photography a perspective acutely different from that of her rich New York counterpart. Lange came to depend

120NET Soundtrack interviews, 40.

solely on her keen power of observation, not as a hobby or a retreat, but as a way of life. She once said, "A visual language...is something that can be developed. The eye is a muscle, after all, and it grows flabby when it isn't used."¹²¹ In Lange's ideal world, she would have been able to lead a completely visual life. As she expressed her desire:

I would like to photograph constantly, every hour, every conscious hour, and assemble a record of everything to which I have a direct response. I would like to accumulate a file of images which would be a complete visual diary. I would like to devote myself to the visual image....I am a bit afraid of the camera, you know. I back away from it. I don't take it up lightly.¹²²

In describing this personal dream, Lange revealed her sensitivity to the surrounding world and her intense devotion to a private pulse.

¹²¹Herz, "Lange in Perspective." 11.

¹²²Ibid.

AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS









'White Angel' Breadline

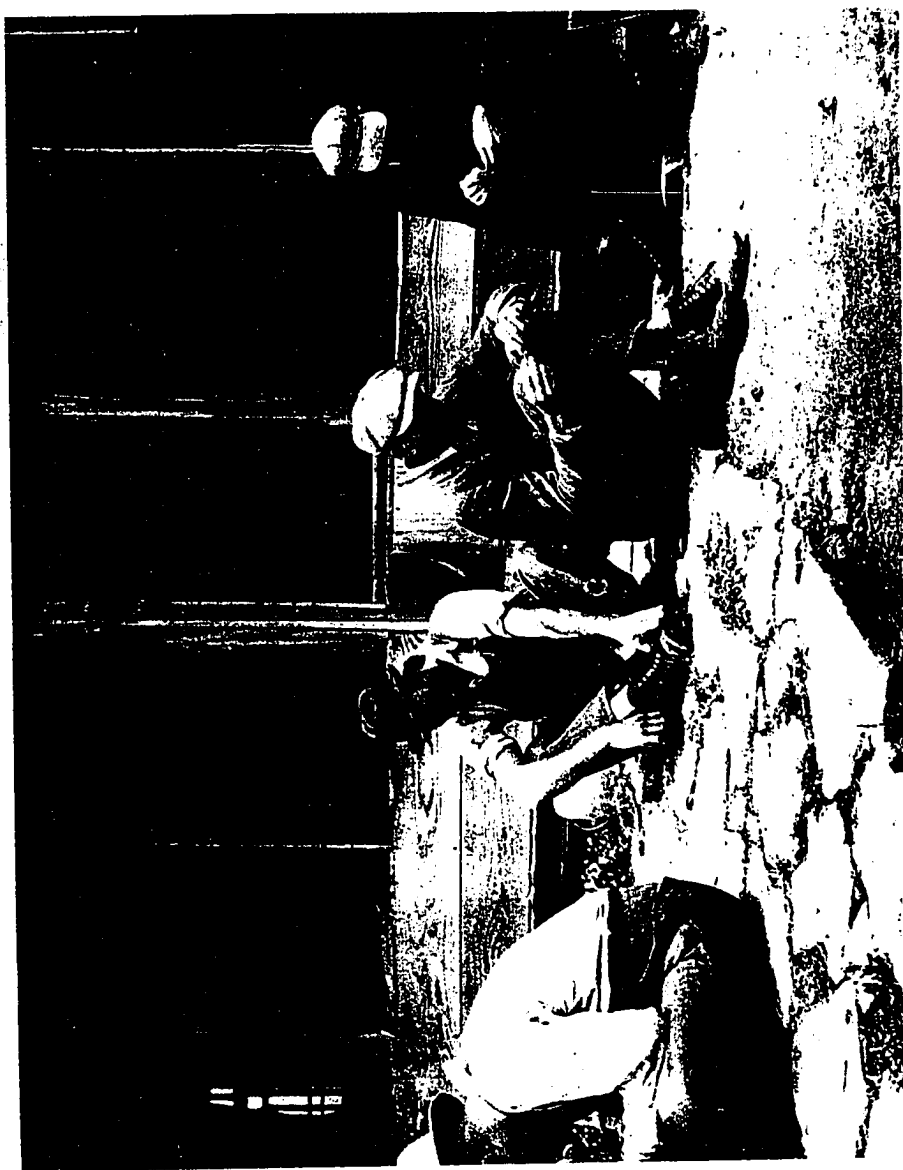


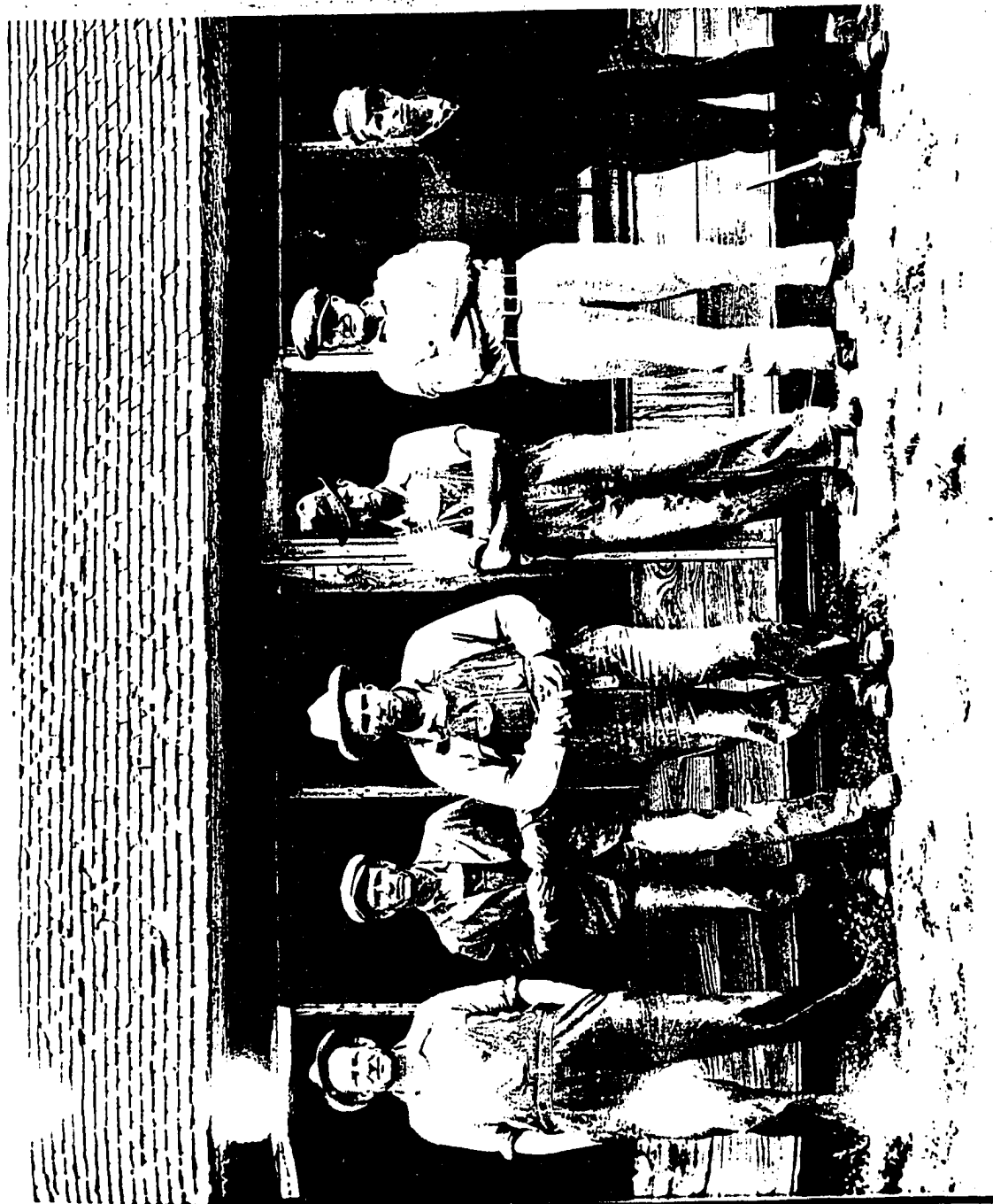














"Migrant Mother"

**INDUSTRIE VIVANTE:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC MISSION**

INDUSTRIAL SUBJECTS CLOSE TO HEART OF LIFE TODAY--STOP.
PHOTOGRAPHY SUITABLE PORTRAY INDUSTRY BECAUSE AN HONEST
KIND OF MEDIUM--STOP. BEAUTY OF INDUSTRY LIES IN ITS
TRUTH AND SIMPLICITY...

Margaret Bourke-White,
Western Union Telegram, 1930

In a note to an old school chum, Margaret Bourke-White wrote, "I have the most thrilling job in America, I believe. I can go anywhere I want to go and meet anybody I want to meet."¹ She was twenty-five years old and just beginning her career as a photographer. In the next twenty-five years, she would create images that made her name the most recognizable credit in the world of photography. In addition to the images she put on film, Bourke-White molded a remarkable image of herself -- as the daring yet glamorous woman charting new, often dangerous, territory. She devoted her life to cultivating her persona, setting it against a background that reached across America and to several continents. Fascinated by the forces of modernity, Bourke-White carefully watched the changes taking place around her and altered her character when circumstances demanded it. Her interest in the material world far transcended her

¹Margaret Bourke-White to Chris A. Addison. 3 March 1930, Correspondence, Margaret Bourke-White Collection, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York (hereafter cited as Bourke-White Collection).

interest in humanity. People were to be persuaded, courted, even manipulated. Products and processes were to be admired, studied, and recorded. Bourke-White's pictures of each would reveal the sources of her lifelong passion.

Young Margaret drew her love for mechanical things from her father Joseph White, a machinery buff and devoted inventor. Aside from his work as a factory superintendent, White spent his life perfecting the printing press. He worked on color press variations, made small presses for map-making during the First World War, and invented the first Braille press. White, who sought out any mechanical challenge, also realized the tremendous experimental possibilities the automobile offered. He bought one as much to try out his technical abilities as to offer exciting Sunday afternoon entertainment to his family. The vehicle provided numerous avenues for White's testing. Margaret, an astute observer of her father's interests, learned to enjoy these with him. Bourke-White biographer Vicki Goldberg relates an experience White shared with his young daughter:

When she was eight, he took her inside a foundry to watch the manufacture of the presses. She already had a taste for adventure and the sense that everything she did with her father was adventurous, but factories came first, for he loved them best of all.... He steered her quietly up a metal stairway, nodding absently at the workmen.... He commanded the great machines they

looked down on at that moment from an iron balcony; he had brought her into a secret world that other girls had never seen.²

Realizing the limits imposed on girls, Margaret watched her mother operate under the rules that confined middle-class women in the early twentieth century. Some changes had been made by the time Margaret was born in 1904, but measureable improvements came not until fifteen years later, when women finally won the right to vote and middle-class society began to embrace some degree of social flexibility for women.³ Margaret believed that her mother simply marked time in the home, exerting her energies to carry out the smallest tasks to utmost perfection. Minnie Bourke White nevertheless offered indirect encouragement to her daughter, by providing an example of determination and courage amidst grim domestic circumstances. She chose not to erect barriers around her daughter's world. As Goldberg points out, Margaret "realized at an early age that her mother's energies were misplaced and that women were generally fated to live within what looked like narrow boundaries. While still a child, she dreamed of enlarging the territory, and no one said a word to discourage her dreams."⁴ The

²Vicki Goldberg, Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 13-14.

³Sara M. Evans, Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 173-176.

⁴Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 7-8.

contributions Minnie provided to Margaret's development equalled those of her husband. Later, as a young photographer, Margaret would honor both parents and their respective families by taking on the hyphenated surname, "Bourke-White."

The interests Margaret cultivated early had a significant impact on the subjects she later elected to photograph. She preferred science over history, geography over penmanship. In an effort to better her daughter's handwriting, Minnie White prompted Margaret to practice it during her summer vacation and even promised her a reward if it improved.⁵ If Margaret thought little about how legible her script was, she did pay attention to instruction in other subjects. When she was thirteen, Margaret took home an encouraging report from her teacher, who informed Joseph White that his daughter had done "excellent work in General Science...."⁶ With the world of science ever changing, boasting new discoveries and various technological improvements, Margaret invested her time and her talents wisely. Knowledge in the scientific arena helped make any future appear brighter. But the sheer gathering of information would mean little if one pictured a personal destiny lived within the confines of the domestic sphere.

⁵Minnie White to Margaret Bourke-White, 14 June 1915, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

⁶Lindsey Best to Joseph White, 22 December 1917, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

Margaret had no such plans; she hoped to combine her knowledge with her quest for adventure.

A thorough character analysis performed on Margaret in 1919 revealed facets of her personality and prospects for her future that amazingly prefigured her actual life experience. In several places the study suggested that Margaret use her adventuresome spirit toward productive ends. Phrenologist Jessie Allen Fowler recommended that Margaret teach geography since she harbored a "desire to travel, explore and see new localities."⁷ Fowler even projected a prophecy based on the teenager's character. She noted:

This temperament enables you to observe the details of everything you see in nature, and when you visit a new city you come away with a clear idea of what you have seen. Therefore it would pay you to travel and see the world, for you will be able to retain ideas of where you have been and what you have done. You should always take photographs of places you have visited....⁸

The personality described was well-suited to the active life, since Fowler determined that her patient was "always ready to go to any place that is suggested." But the analyst also addressed Margaret's weaknesses, about which she issued the clear warning. "Cultivate a little more

⁷Character Analysis of Margaret White, conducted by Jessie Allen Fowler, 27 May 1919, Bourke-White Collection.

⁸Ibid.

reserve, tact, and diplomacy.... Try to moderate your approbateness or sensitiveness of mind, your desire to excel, and your love of popularity."⁹ Even at age fifteen, Margaret White realized that others saw the enormity of her potential and the amount of energy required to fulfill it. She set her goals accordingly, keeping in mind her father's creativity and her mother's determination as examples to emulate.

In Margaret's freshman year at Columbia University, her father suffered a massive stroke and died. His financial mismanagement forced Margaret to find another source for her college tuition. Fortunately, her Uncle Lazar assumed the responsibility, allowing his niece to resume her studies. But after Margaret's freshman year, he could no longer finance her education. As the White family's money matters grew worse, it appeared that Margaret would not be able to continue her education. A philanthropic neighbor who knew about the family hardships offered to send Margaret to college, asking only that she do the same someday for a needy student. When Margaret expressed her interest in herpetology, she was told to enroll at the University of Michigan, where Professor Alexander Ruthven taught. She left her New York home for Ann Arbor at age eighteen, entertaining two passions, one for reptiles, the other for photographs. After one semester, Margaret's talent for

⁹Ibid.

taking pictures surpassed her abilities in the zoology classroom. Dr. Ruthven urged his would-be protege to move away from a career in herpetology and toward one in photography. He found employment for Margaret in the university museum, where she could combine her interests in science and photography by making negative prints of exhibit material.¹⁰ In her sophomore year at Michigan, Margaret began to consider herself a photographer. She took pictures for the yearbook, assisted other photographers, and even cultivated a romance with a fellow photographer. Everett Chapman, known to his classmates as "Chappie", reminded Margaret so much of her father that she was immediately attracted to him. He studied electrical processes and dabbled in photography. Goldberg has said that Margaret adored Chappie because he was "modeled on her dreams and her upbringing."¹¹ Through his own death, Joseph White had etched the outline of his daughter's future. She had gone to Michigan, taken up his photography hobby, and reclaimed him in the person of Everett Chapman.

Of all the common interests they shared, Margaret and Chappie most enjoyed taking and developing photographs together. This work helped lead the two into a steady relationship, one that would revolve around photography and ultimately be dissolved by it. Although each took on

¹⁰Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 22-32.

¹¹Ibid., 35.

various jobs, Margaret was more determined than her counterpart to make something of her talent with the camera. Her boyfriend had his eyes set on a graduate degree in engineering, and he carelessly assumed Margaret would follow him to his chosen destination. As they became more seriously involved, their highly-charged emotional lives crossed and caused each a great deal of suffering. Both confused energy, jealousy, and uneasiness for love. Believing that simultaneous elation and misery could be cured only one way, they decided to pursue it. They got married.

Exercising their collective unconventionality, Margaret and Chappie shunned a big wedding in favor of a brief ceremony they scheduled on Friday, the thirteenth of June, 1924. Since none of the White family members attended, Margaret wrote to tell her mother about the less than spectacular event, which she described as "a miserable affair."¹² She laid much blame on the Episcopalian minister, who insisted on a rehearsal in order to make the ceremony "as dignified as possible."¹³ Both bride and groom were exhausted since they had been working in the darkroom until two o'clock the night before. Immediately after the wedding they went back to making prints, forgoing

¹²Bourke-White to Minnie White. 22 June 1924. Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

¹³Ibid.

a proper honeymoon. Later, when the newlyweds managed to get away to a quiet lakeside cottage, Chappie's mother and sister unexpectedly showed up for a vacation of their own. Margaret's troubles with her mother-in-law began early, foretelling a conflict that would grow increasingly tense as the marriage wore on. She remembered that after the wedding ceremony, Mrs. Chapman "went home and cried two days afterward, and said that she'd never feel right about it...."¹⁴ The struggle between the Chapman mother and bride continued, leaving the young engineer caught in the middle. While he endured and often fostered his mother's pouting, Chappie watched his wife delve further into her work and feed her ambition to succeed. Margaret continued with her photography jobs even though her husband had taken a good position at Purdue University. She craved a satisfying domestic existence but harbored the fear of losing her individuality in it.¹⁵ Her marriage was a stormy one. She remained torn between home and career, while Chappie attempted to choose between his wife and his mother. That he frequently switched his loyalties from one woman to

¹⁴Bourke-White to Minnie White, 24 June 1924, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

¹⁵Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 51-56. Goldberg discusses Margaret's ambivalence about having a family. Though Margaret wanted a baby and hoped it would strengthen her marriage, she realized the danger of bringing a child into such an unstable household. There is some evidence to suggest she once became pregnant but carefully orchestrated her own miscarriage.

the other added further complications. The couple's move from Michigan to Indiana and then to Ohio left Margaret with various college credits but no degree.¹⁶ The one constant was her picture-taking. She always managed to find jobs, either on campus or around town. Margaret's photography generated excitement in her life while her temperamental husband offered only silence.

In 1926 Margaret finally worked up enough courage to leave Chappie and pursue her education again. She returned to New York, enrolled at Cornell, resumed her studies in herpetology, and continued to take pictures. Recognizing the advantages a single woman enjoyed, Margaret never mentioned her marriage. She wanted desperately to succeed on her own. On a trip to New York City, she spent most of her time "running around trying to make connections...in the photographic world."¹⁷ An observant relative described the Margaret she saw in New York as "a Janus faced person", possessing inside "a little girl who won't stay down, who peeps out constantly, and comes out boldly when the adult person gets tired and retires for recuperation."¹⁸ Aunt Gussie, who continued to recognize Margaret's marital

¹⁶Minnie White to F. A. Gilfillan, 28 August 1928, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Papers. Mrs. White points out Margaret's difficulty in completing a degree due to the various moves the Chapmans had made.

¹⁷Aunt Gussie to Bourke-White, 17 May 1927, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

¹⁸Ibid.

status, offered a few helpful hints to her niece, such as "Don't wear yourself out.... I think your photography will be just the kind of a thing you can combine with being a housekeeper, as you will be able to a large extent to select your time for your work...."19 The last thing Margaret wanted to do was "select" time for her photography. It came first. Although she considered a reconciliation with Chappie, she finally decided not to forfeit her passion or ambition in order to keep an unhappy marriage intact. An inviting job offer in Cleveland convinced Margaret to give her full attention to photography. It also prompted her to tie up loose ends.

New circumstances and old problems had combined to ensure Margaret a fresh start, one with a path to success. For two years, Margaret had listened to Chappie's mother express hurt that her son had "deserted her.... He had chosen a wife instead of coming back to her."20 When the Chapmans finally decided to dissolve their union, Margaret looked back on trials with her mother-in-law as good experience that toughened her. She wrote:

I owe a peculiar debt to my mother-in-law. She left me strong, knowing I could deal with a difficult experience, learning from it, and leaving it behind without bitterness. in a neat closed room.... I am grateful to her because, all

19Ibid.

20Minnie White to F. A. Gilfillan, 12 August 1928, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

unknowing, she opened the door to a more spacious life than I could ever have dreamed.²¹

With the divorce Margaret dropped her married name and reclaimed "White", determined to erase from memory her fiery, short-lived romance.²² At age twenty-three, she started over again, recreating both her identity and her image. Margaret cut her hair, bought colorful dresses and gloves to match her camera cloths, and set out to record the world in pictures. She began the trek in Cleveland.

A thriving midwestern city, Cleveland boasted various industrial plants and plenty of river traffic. The city itself fascinated Margaret. She walked the streets studying the architectural design of houses and buildings. and she always carried along her portfolio and her camera. In a public square she took her first commercial photograph. a shot of a black man preaching the gospel to an audience of pigeons. The Cleveland Chamber of Commerce paid her ten dollars for the scene.²³ Margaret worked on a commissioned basis for several months. taking pictures for architectural firms and a number of wealthy patrons. Her bosses quickly recognized Margaret's eye for artistry and design. as she

²¹Margaret Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 28-29.

²²Margaret Chapman, Divorce Papers, 3 January 1928. Bourke-White Collection. In the divorce agreement, Margaret's maiden name was restored.

²³Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 36.

provided them with slick, high-quality images emphasizing the line and form of office buildings and private estates. She continued with this work in order to support herself, even though she wanted to devote time to more stimulating subjects. She decided that the massive Terminal Tower, a structure still under construction, was a perfect place for visual experimentation and personal adventure. The pictures she took there got her professional reputation off to a brilliant start, as the tower's controlling interests, the Van Sweringens, named her "official photographer" for the project. Margaret had free reign to photograph the inside, the outside, even the top of the tower, if she wished. Goldberg notes that the Van Sweringens paid Margaret "to feed her own excitement."²⁴ She loved standing high above the city on steel scaffolding. Within months she had rented a studio on the twelfth floor of the new skyscraper and was able to enjoy the breathtaking heights anytime she pleased. Margaret realized she was on her way up.

The view allowed the young photographer to look down below onto people, who seemed like tiny ants making their paths through the streets. At eye level, she could see factories sprawled out among the city. A look up into the sky showed her industry's trademark of success, gray smoke billowing from automobile plants, paper mills, and steel mills. These signs reminded Margaret that industry

²⁴Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 77.

dominated America, that it represented the future and led to success those who took it seriously. She wanted to enter the industrial world and take photographs, images of machines, operations, processes and final products. The possibilities it offered thrilled her, just as a new car had excited her father, providing him endless opportunities for experimentation. Of all the available manufacturing industries, steel-making impressed Margaret most. She exclaimed, "There is something dynamic about the rush of flowing metal, the dying sparks, the clouds of smoke, the heat, the traveling cranes clanging back and forth."²⁵ Steel marked the age, one of progress and prosperity. The industry would help launch Margaret Bourke-White's career in photography.²⁶

In 1928, Bourke-White accepted two offers that elevated her professional status. One, from the president of the Otis Steel Mill in Cleveland, paid her \$100 a photograph; the other, from Columbia University economics professor Roy Stryker, provided public exposure but no considerable income. Bourke-White accepted both, realizing the

²⁵Bourke-White, quoted in Jonathan Silverman, For the World to See: The Life of Margaret Bourke-White (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 8.

²⁶Margaret hyphenated her last name sometime in the late 1920s as she built her professional image. She makes reference to it in a letter, noting, "...everybody calls me Miss Bourke-White as tho' I were a personage." 4 May 1929. Bourke-White to Minnie White, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

complementary nature of her two options. She began exercising the clever business sense that would sell her pictures even after economic depression hit the United States. Bourke-White quickly shed her cloak of inexperience and revealed a sharp eye for self-promotion in the business world. When Stryker requested a few of her photographs to use as illustration in his revised economics textbook, Bourke-White immediately sent to him a full portfolio free of charge.²⁷

Bourke-White believed that students needed to recognize the beauty of industry as much as corporate stockholders did. She also realized that a book written by the highly-esteemed economics faculty at Columbia would mean wide circulation of her name and her pictures. The university's professors were so impressed with the photographs Bourke-White delivered to them that many requested prints to hang in their offices. "They are without doubt the finest set of industrial pictures I have ever seen and we all wish to commend you upon your ability to capture the artistic in the factory," Stryker wrote.²⁸ He further noted that one of his students had been so inspired by the pictures that the young man wanted "to get out and work again."²⁹ Bourke-White

²⁷Roy Stryker-Margaret Bourke-White correspondence. 26 October to 31 October 1928, Bourke-White Collection.

²⁸Stryker to Bourke-White, 16 November 1928. Bourke-White Collection.

²⁹Ibid.

helped bring to life the ideologies promoted by Stryker and his colleague Rex Tugwell. In a 1924 edition of their textbook, American Economic Life, the authors had expressed a desire to provide for readers "the understanding, the control, and the improvement of the uses of industrial forces."³⁰ Illustration, particularly photography, enhanced their presentation. One of the most telling images in the text showed the dominance of industry's components over the individual. In a pencilled sketch, a huge crane dips molten steel as the accompanying manual laborers, who are dwarfed by the mechanism, tentatively look on.³¹ In the Otis Steel Mill, Bourke-White captured a similar scene on film, a first prize winner at the Cleveland Museum of Art show that year.³² Stryker had recognized early in his career the impact of visual representation, but a look at Bourke-White's pictures convinced him of its absolute strength.

³⁰Rexford Guy Tugwell, Thomas Munro, and Roy E. Stryker, American Economic Life and the Means of its Improvement (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), p. ix. Maren Stange explains the intricacies of the textbook's philosophy, including John Dewey's impact, in "The Management of Vision: Rexford Tugwell and Roy Stryker in the 1920s," Afterimage 15 (March 1988), 6.

³¹Stange, "Management of Vision," 8. Stange argues that the production process overrides the individuals involved, a vital point in American Economic Life, since it suggested that numerous ethnic industrial workers lost their cultural baggage in the "melting pot" of U.S. factory work. A thoroughly "Americanized", and thus desirable, working class resulted.

³²Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 87.

The images Bourke-White created fed the notion that industry, as an idea and icon of power, transcended a single person's capacity for control. But her pictures affirmed, rather than criticized, the processes of modernization. Bourke-White happened to appreciate industry and its machines; she saw in them uncompromised beauty. The scenes she created stood in contrast to earlier images, both verbal and visual, that had depicted industry and mechanization as dehumanizing forces. When Theatre Guild Magazine ran a full-page print of Bourke-White's favorite "dynamo" shot, the caption read:

In her camera study of the dynamo, Margaret Bourke-White has evidently caught some of the power and beauty of the machine which suggested to Eugene O'Neill his Dramatic theme. But the repose in Miss Bourke-White's interpretation is quite unlike the demoniac godliness of Mr. O'Neill's.³³

Facing modernization, Bourke-White stood in awe not fear. Through the lens she recognized her own reverence, then captured it on film for the rest of the world to contemplate.

While Bourke-White's photographs reflected the nation's economic structure and society's response, they also served a more functional, and perhaps immediate, purpose. The

³³Tearsheet, Theatre Guild Magazine (March 1929). Bourke-White Collection. Bourke-White received twenty-five dollars for the photograph, the magazine's first full-page picture.

images were a means of persuasion. Twelve Bourke-White photographs graced the pages of a booklet entitled The Story of Steel, the Otis Steel Company's brochure for stockholders and clients. The Otis job took Bourke-White six months to complete, as she filled "waste basket after waste basket...with discarded films."³⁴ She sought artistic perfection, but she also realized that her task involved changing minds and molding opinions. The dozen printed pictures proved such a huge success that other corporations wanted to commission the young woman who turned assembly lines, ore piles, and smoke stacks into works of art. Republic Steel, Lincoln Electric, and the Chrysler Corporation hired her to photograph their mills and projects, allowing Bourke-White one adventure after another inside the man's world she longed to explore. On her various expeditions, she charmed laborers, floor managers, and corporate presidents, leaving each with indelible impressions of her style, wit, and daring. Men rushed to assist the young photographer loaded down with heavy cameras, tripods, and lights. Bourke-White realized her advantageous position among them, and once categorized her helpful friends as either "high hats" or "low hats". She wrote:

³⁴Simon and Schuster Review Department. "Advance Release" typewritten vitae on Margaret Bourke-White, 1931, Bourke-White Collection.

My high hat friends are my advertisers, and as long as I have the publicity counselor and the advertising manager of the Union Trust Co., the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and the Treasurer of the East Ohio Gas company, the publicity manager of the new Union Terminal and the president of the Otis Steel, talking about me at luncheon, I shall never need to buy any advertising in Cleveland.

...[M]y low hat friends do all my hack work. The amount I have had done for me is marvelous, and I could scarcely buy for money all the little fussy jobs that have gone into making my little apartment the BOURKE-WHITE STUDIO.³⁵

The charm Bourke-White displayed would eventually have worn thin in the business world had her work not been superb. But her pictures commanded as much attention, if not more, than Bourke-White herself did. If her personality turned some heads, her photographs went a step further -- they received long, thoughtful stares. Bourke-White's careful cultivation of the art of persuasion had begun to pay dividends.

The Otis Steel Company pictures, which showed up in several newspapers' rotogravure sections, also landed on Henry Luce's desk in New York City. Luce, the publisher of Time magazine, found the pictures fascinating. The Otis job had required Bourke-White to experiment with various film types, exposures, and lighting methods because of "the intense heat, splashing metal, and the extremes of brilliant

³⁵Diary entry, December 1927, quoted in Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 92.

lights and heavy shades."36 Luce, impressed with the photographer's eye, her range, and her unique interpretative abilities, wasted no time in summoning Bourke-White to his office. He wired, "HAROLD WENGLER HAS SHOWN ME YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS STOP WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU STOP COULD YOU COME TO NEW YORK WITHIN A WEEK AT OUR EXPENSE STOP PLEASE TELEGRAPH WHEN."37 Seeing a great opportunity before her, Bourke-White informed Luce that she would arrive in the city early the next week. According to one Time employee, the rising star decided to take "a free ride" on the corporation's budget -- she arrived in New York but "went about her own business for two or three days before she bothered to look up Mr. Luce."38 When Bourke-White finally met the magazine owner, the two discussed his idea for a new publication devoted entirely to business and industry. Luce intended for the magazine, entitled Fortune, to survey the diversity of the industrial world. He planned to reach a wide audience by covering Fortune's pages with striking visual images. And he wanted Bourke-White to help him succeed.

36Typewritten biography, dated Fall 1931. Bourke-White Collection.

37Henry R. Luce to Margaret Bourke-White, 8 May 1929, Bourke-White Collection.

38Undated office memorandum, Calkins to Hodgins, TIME, INC., Bourke-White Collection.

Luce offered Bourke-White a fulltime position with the magazine, which was to print its first issue in January, 1930. Although the opportunities and benefits appealed to her, she declined the job. Unwilling to sacrifice her freelance work for a prestigious staff position, Bourke-White explained to her mother, "I would rather develop as an industrial photographer than an executive."³⁹ The meeting between publisher and photographer ended in compromise, though, as Bourke-White allowed him to borrow her steel mill pictures in order to sell advertisers on the Fortune idea. Luce, in turn, considered Bourke-White's offer to work parttime on the magazine while continuing to take commissioned assignments. Since the editor wanted to launch "a purely business magazine with the best procurable in industrial art," he could hardly afford to be inflexible.⁴⁰ He needed a photographer like Bourke-White, one who had taken the steel industry by storm, had impressed architects throughout the Midwest, and was gradually making her way through the ranks of advertising from Cleveland to Madison Avenue. Within a few weeks, Fortune's managing editor, Parker Lloyd-Smith, wrote to Bourke-White, "This is to inform you officially of what you might conceivably have suspected. That we are glad to accept your proposition of

³⁹Bourke-White to Minnie White, 16 May 1929, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

⁴⁰Ibid.

giving us half your time from July 1. The cash consideration being \$1000 a month."⁴¹ In the summer of 1929, Bourke-White began her affiliation with the Luce publications. The relationship would not only enhance her professional reputation but would feed her adventuresome spirit.

Fortune's only photographer went to work immediately. Within a week her travel agenda had been expanded to include Europe. Bourke-White excitedly dashed off a wire to her mother, exclaiming, "I cant believe it.... Just came from their offices this morning where they discussed sending me to photograph the Chmpaign [sic] Caves of France and the marble quarries of Italy along with some possible ship building in Germany."⁴² Fortune's developers had grandiose objectives in mind and planned to implement them using the talents of its ambitious new photographer. Before the magazine sent its cameras abroad, though, it would establish a reputation in the United States. Since America had been the most prosperous industrial nation throughout the 1920s, it seemed a logical place to begin the survey. In July Bourke-White began crisscrossing the continent, completing assignments from the East coast to Chicago to Texas to Canada. On the trek she photographed watchmaking, glass

⁴¹Silverman, For the World to See. 11.

⁴²Margaret Bourke-White to Minnie White, 24 May 1929, family correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

blowing, meat packing, salt mining, and plow blade manufacturing.⁴³ In each place she left her mark, as both extraordinary photographer and captivating woman. One Time Corporation executive argued that Bourke-White contributed a great deal to the early success of Fortune, which depended heavily on visual imagery. He wrote, "There is no denying that Bourke-White's work did most to making them [illustrations] outstanding -- also, the intense little girl who took pictures for the big magazine of business added its fillip."⁴⁴

Even as she strove to please advertisers and editors, Bourke-White worked to develop a unique style in industrial photography. Though she often made claims to have invented the probing focus on industry's various components, she received a good deal of assistance in solidifying her style. Bourke-White had developed her visual sensibilities in a Clarence White class, years after Doris Ulmann and Dorothea Lange had studied with him. The experiences Bourke-White had with the photography master stood in contrast to those his prewar students could remember. Since pictorialism

⁴³Simon and Schuster Review Department, "Advance Release" typewritten vitae on Margaret Bourke-White, 1931, Bourke-White Collection.

⁴⁴Undated office memorandum, Calkins to Hodgins, Time, Inc., Bourke-White Collection. Within three weeks after Luce had distributed Bourke-White's steel pictures to potential magazine advertisers, he "had sold enough ad pages to fill several Fortune issues." Silverman, For the World to See, 11.

declined after the war, visual emphases shifted from shadowy scenes to more sharply-defined objects. Bourke-White stepped in just as one trend in photography edged out another. Though she was on the membership rolls of the Pictorial Photographers of America for years, her work rarely, if ever, exemplified their artistic standards.⁴⁵ The most memorable event Bourke-White recalled about the White School was an occasion where she posed nude for her classmates.⁴⁶ One of those classmates, Ralph Steiner, reappeared in Bourke-White's life seven years later, not long after the Otis Steel job and her first taste of fame. Steiner, an artistic skyscraper photographer, quickly became Bourke-White's most scrutinizing critic. He not only advised her on technical matters but helped keep her ego in check. Bourke-White confided to her mother that Steiner never praised her work.⁴⁷ He remembered the night that he finally penetrated the photographer's cool, hard demeanor. He laughed at Bourke-White, who burst into tears and cried, "You're the only person in America who doesn't think I'm a

⁴⁵Bourke-White membership cards, Pictorial Photographers of America, Cleveland chapter and New York City chapter, Bourke-White Collection.

⁴⁶Bourke-White to Minnie White, 19 May 1929. Family Correspondence; also, Ralph Steiner to Margaret Bourke-White, 24 April [1930], Bourke-White Collection.

⁴⁷Bourke-White to Minnie White, 19 May 1929. Family Correspondence. Bourke-White Collection. Bourke-White mentioned that Steiner did manage to slip one compliment into his stream of critical comments. He noted that her "viewpoint was becoming more direct and creative."

great, great photographer." Steiner believed that was exactly the reason she kept returning for his advice.⁴⁸ He taught her about different types of lenses and filters and focussing mounts, all the while improving her views and stimulating her creativity.⁴⁹ Steiner's criticism helped Bourke-White successfully continue her mission to show industry in a new light and from a different angle.

While Steiner kept Bourke-White's feet on the ground, other colleagues fed her ego by admiring the approach she took in photography. Dwight Macdonald, a young editor with Fortune, collaborated with Bourke-White on one of the magazine's first stories, a survey of the Corning Glass factory in New York. After seeing her pictures on the series, Macdonald wrote to Bourke-White:

It's very fine--even better than I anticipated. You certainly got a great deal out of your material; I especially liked the ones on the sand pile, the potter, and the blower.... Your pictures fit in well with the story.... It will be a great combination of pictures and text.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Story told in Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 100.

⁴⁹Steiner to Bourke-White, 2 August [?], Bourke-White Collection. Steiner probably wrote this letter in 1929, after Bourke-White had learned Fortune was sending her to Europe. He suggests that she extend the insurance on a particular lens to include European travel. Steiner goes into a detailed discussion on the DeBrie camera, an f1.5 Meyer Plasmat lens, a 6" f4.5 Zeiss Tessar mount, and gelatine filters. He closes, "I'll get you the rest of the equipment with myself as instructor."

⁵⁰Dwight Macdonald to Bourke-White, 26 July 1929, Bourke-White Collection.

Another Fortune writer, Archibald MacLeish, recognized Bourke-White's skill with the camera and begged her for prints of the glassmaking series. When she obliged him, MacLeish not only thanked her but offered a glowing evaluation of her method. He wrote:

All your best things convince me that if photography is ever to become an art in the serious & rigorous & harsh sense of the term (not in the terms of the fashion magazines) -- that is, if it is ever to become an art comparable to the art of painting -- it will have to develop along the road you have set out upon! It will have to create its objects by isolating them in the real world, not by arranging them in a fake world.⁵¹

Although she never took part in the popular argument over whether photography itself was an art, Bourke-White defended her approach as an artistic photographer. She once told a dissatisfied client that she would rather destroy less-than-perfect prints than have them accepted with reluctance. She claimed to have followed a policy that allowed only satisfactory photographs to leave her studio, and told the patron, "I want my name signed only to pictures that I think are as artistically perfect as I can make them."⁵²

⁵¹Archibald MacLeish to Bourke-White, undated letter, Bourke-White Collection. MacLeish probably wrote the letter in the late summer or autumn of 1929, before Bourke-White left for Canada on a Fortune assignment. He said, "Canada ought to be swell. Don't forget your furs."

⁵²Bourke-White to William H. Albers, 23 October 1928. Bourke-White Collection.

In her attempts to isolate objects and make them aesthetically pleasing, Bourke-White often overlooked the people and things around her. With such deliberate intent, she unknowingly clouded her peripheral vision. On into the 1930s, when she turned her camera toward people, she would receive biting criticism for encapsulating overblown fragments of humanity and thus manipulating the human experience. One of the most crucial situations Bourke-White failed to recognize took place in a Boston bank the last week of October, 1929. Assigned to take photographs of the bank's interior design, Bourke-White chose to work at night when the institution was closed and its customers were out. On her last night there, she became frustrated with the bank's vice-presidents, who had stayed late and were frantically running about, too often in front of her camera lens. Amidst Bourke-White's complaints, one official finally said, "I guess you don't know, the bottom dropped out of everything.... The stock market! Haven't you read the papers?"⁵³ Bourke-White had, instead, been reading a football manual in preparation for an upcoming date with a Harvard fan. In her autobiography, Portrait of Myself, Bourke-White spoke of the ill-fated night and admitted,

⁵³Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself. 72.

"History was pushing her face into the camera, and here was I, turning my lens the other way."⁵⁴

By the time Henry Luce published the first issue of Fortune in February 1930, American business and finance had changed dramatically. Following the stock market crash came bank failures and factory closings. Unemployment began to steadily rise. The prosperity that had characterized the 1920s virtually disappeared. But Fortune carried on, in spite of the irony of its existence. Although financial disaster seemed possible in any corner of the United States, Luce continued to assign projects surveying various industries and businesses. He sent Bourke-White to Hollywood to inspect movie-making and on to Seattle to photograph the logging industry. She still gave the magazine only half her time but soon realized that her soaring reputation could be attributed to Fortune's popularity.⁵⁵ While continuing to accept private commissions, Bourke-White also worked through the Cleveland advertising agency, Meldrum and Fewsmith. Through the firm, she got jobs that paid well, but her boss Joe Fewsmith remembered that his best commercial photographer was willing to do anything, "from photographing a box of tacks to

⁵⁴Ibid. Years later, a friend of Bourke-White's said to her, "You must have been the only photographer in the whole United States who was inside a bank that night."

⁵⁵Ralph Steiner to Bourke-White, 24 April [1930], Bourke-White Collection. Steiner closes his letter, "'Fortune' is certainly skyrocketing your fame."

climbing up on the scaffolding on the top of a skyscraper."⁵⁶ Bourke-White kept herself so busy that the spectre of nationwide economic disaster seemed very distant. In the summer of 1930, she would forget about it entirely.

On June 27th Ruth White sent her younger sister a wire that read: "SS BREMEN SAILING SATURDAY MORNING NEW YORK NY = PLEASURE ROMANCE THRILLS SUCCESS I KNOW THEY ARE ALL AWAITING YOU HERE AND ON THE OTHER SIDE."⁵⁷ Luce had finally arranged his photographer's long-awaited trip to Europe. In the spring, Bourke-White had written to a friend, "Imagine, getting paid to go to Europe! It seems too good to be true."⁵⁸ Her itinerary included a long stay in Germany, with photography jobs scheduled at the Krupp Steel Works, the Allgemeine Elektricitäts Gesellschaft, and the I. G. Farben chemical corporation. Upon arrival, Bourke-White found that women were unwelcome in most of the German industrial plants, but she was a pleasing exception -- an American photographer representing a highly-regarded business magazine managed to gain entrance into several

⁵⁶Joe Fewsmith to Raymond Rubican, 15 October 1930. Bourke-White Collection.

⁵⁷Telegram, Ruth White to Bourke-White. 27 June 1930, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

⁵⁸Bourke-White to Chris A. Addison, 3 March 1930, Bourke-White Collection.

forbidden places.⁵⁹ She considered her arrest at a factory near Cologne the "most exciting experience" she had while in Germany. She told her mother, "I was surrounded by police who thought I was a French spy."⁶⁰ Fortune could take credit for feeding Bourke-White's daring spirit in her quest for adventure. When she finished the German assignments, she was directed to head east to the Soviet Union, a place that would teach her "a lesson in patience."⁶¹

Bourke-White entered the country at a particularly crucial time. The twelve-year-old Soviet experiment in government had expanded to include the huge task of mechanizing a vast, largely rural nation. Soviet leader Josef Stalin had envisioned a plan that would reorganize the country within five years. A substantial part of the plan involved introducing industry to a population completely unfamiliar with its processes and its machines. Bourke-White knew only a little more about the plan than she did about the political situation. Since the United States had elected not to recognize the Soviet government, Bourke-White

⁵⁹Despite several attempts, neither Bourke-White nor her Fortune counterpart, Parker Lloyd-Smith, were allowed inside the Krupp plant.

⁶⁰Bourke-White to Minnie White, 14 July 1930, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

⁶¹Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 93. When she was forced to wait in Berlin for five and a half weeks while the Soviet embassy approved her visa, Bourke-White realized she would have to overcome numerous obstacles posed by the Soviet bureaucracy.

was one of a few Americans (and the only photographer) who had been allowed to travel inside the new Russia. Perhaps her disinterest in diplomatic relations made her presence more palatable to Soviet officials. Bourke-White later admitted, "No one could have known less about Russia politically than I knew -- or cared less. To me, politics was colorless beside the drama of the machine."⁶² The portfolio pictures she toted everywhere grew worn as Russian bureaucrats and workers alike passed them around and marvelled at the beautiful images of American industry. Bourke-White's photographs so impressed the right officials that she was presented travelling papers which stipulated few restrictions. She could move freely without fear of being searched at every turn. One Russian bureaucrat told Bourke-White she could "go to the moon" with the government papers she held.⁶³ Relishing her independence, Bourke-White took full advantage of the few weeks she had in the Soviet Union to photograph its progress.

To her, the most appealing aspect of the Five Year Plan was its expedience. The Soviet bureaucracy attempted to accomplish in five years what had taken one hundred years in the United States. Bourke-White realized it would be possible to record the industrialization process step by

⁶²Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 91-92.

⁶³Bourke-White to Minnie White, 10 September 1930, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

step, a rare opportunity for one photographer. Since nineteenth-century artists had shown little interest in the American industrial revolution, the tremendous changes that had accompanied it had gone undocumented.⁶⁴ Bourke-White was in a position to capture similar scenes and show much more of the process since it had been greatly accelerated. She felt the contagious excitement of workers fascinated by new machines and various gadgets. Their favorite phrase, Amerikanskoe tempo, referred to the ultimate model in industry -- the American way -- one dependent upon assembly-line production. Bourke-White remembered the Stalingrad factory workers' animated discussions about the wonders of the conveyor belt. And everywhere in Russia, people worshipped machines. Bourke-White wrote, "They looked on the coming of the machine as their Saviour: it was the instrument of their deliverance."⁶⁵ The young photographer so justified her work in the Soviet Union:

Things are happening in Russia, and happening with staggering speed. I could not afford to miss any of it. I wanted to make the pictures of this astonishing development, because, whatever the outcome, whether success or failure, the plan is so gigantic, so unprecedented in all history that I felt that these photographic records might have

⁶⁴Bourke-White, Speech outline for J. Walter Thompson Advertising, 31 January 1933, Bourke-White Collection. One of the points Bourke-White wished to emphasize in her talk was: "In Russia things are happening now."

⁶⁵Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 95.

some historical value. I saw the five-year plan as a great scenic drama being unrolled before the eyes of the world.⁶⁶

American curiosity about the mysteries of Russia worked in Bourke-White's favor. She returned home to find numerous offers for her pictures of Soviet industry. Seeking advice, she informed publisher Max Schuster that she had been "bombarded with requests" from newspapers and magazines for the photographs.⁶⁷ Though Fortune had first rights to the pictures, Schuster suggested that Bourke-White limit their circulation in order "to arouse anticipatory interest."⁶⁸ After Fortune had published several of the photographs in its February 1931 issue, Bourke-White decided to accept an offer made by the Simon and Schuster publishing house. Max Schuster wanted to publish the Russia pictures, but he also wanted words to complement them. He asked Bourke-White if she would provide a few stories about her trip to the Soviet Union. She promised to lock herself away in her studio and ignore the telephone while she attempted to chronicle her experiences. Assured that Bourke-White would finish the task, Schuster drew up a contract in April that allowed the

⁶⁶Simon and Schuster Review Department, "Advance Release" typewritten vitae on Margaret Bourke-White, 1931. Bourke-White Collection.

⁶⁷Bourke-White to M. Lincoln Schuster, 22 January 1931. Bourke-White Collection.

⁶⁸M. Lincoln Schuster to Bourke-White, 26 January 1931. Bourke-White Collection.

author a \$250 advance and guaranteed her "all property rights to the original photographs."⁶⁹ Bourke-White found that showing her pictures to the American public was easy. Writing, however, was a different matter -- she would have to exercise the prudence of a skilled diplomat.

The magnificence of Soviet industrialization had not blinded Bourke-White to the country's problems. Despite the help offered by American engineers and businessmen, industrializing the rural society proved to be a difficult task. Even with Henry Ford's assembly lines, Albert Kahn's factory designs, and Colonel Hugh Cooper's personal direction of the Dnieper Dam construction, domestic problems persisted.⁷⁰ In a letter to her mother, Bourke-White described the severity of the food situation, in which the peasants hoarded what little they raised and the government exported the rest "to pay for machinery."⁷¹ Upon her return to the United States, Bourke-White summed it up in ten words: "Little food, no shoes, terrible inefficiency,

⁶⁹Schuster to Bourke-White, 11 March 1931: Original contract agreement between Margaret Bourke-White and Simon & Schuster, 24 April 1931, Bourke-White Collection. With only minor changes, the final contract agreement was signed 21 August, 1931. Bourke-White would receive 10% of the retail price on the first 5,000 copies of her book.

⁷⁰Bourke-White explains the extent of American business involvement in the Soviet Union in Portrait of Myself, 92. She notes that these men were there "strictly for business reasons" and that they made tremendous contributions to the expanding Soviet economy.

⁷¹Bourke-White to Minnie White, 10 September 1930, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

steady progress, great hope."⁷² While writing Eyes on Russia for Simon and Schuster, she chose her words carefully. Bourke-White was most afraid her critics would claim that the Soviet government had only allowed her to see what it wanted her to see. Since the government had made Bourke-White its guest and had given her "a fat roll of ruble notes," her motives might appear suspicious to the American public.⁷³ She alleviated any potential controversy by concentrating on the minute details of the cement-making, steel-making, and dam-building. She complemented her descriptive stories with charming anecdotes and scored points with her editors.⁷⁴ The balance she struck helped to make Eyes on Russia a success. In her mother's opinion, Bourke-White had mastered the art of diplomacy. After seeing the book, Minnie White wired her daughter: "WISE GIRL TO STEER CLEAR OF SCYLLA OF POLITICS CHARYBDIS OF PROPHECY...."⁷⁵

⁷²Newspaper tearsheet, Bourke-White to Walter Winchell, December 1930, Bourke-White Collection; also, Margaret Bourke-White, Eyes on Russia (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1931), 19.

⁷³Bourke-White to Schuster, 8 September 1931, Bourke-White Collection.

⁷⁴Clifton Fadiman to Bourke-White, 19 August 1931, Bourke-White Collection. He congratulates her on "a splendid job", one requiring "very few changes."

⁷⁵Minnie White to Bourke-White, December 1931, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

Bourke-White wanted to write nothing that would compromise her skyrocketing career. At twenty-seven years old, she had made a name for herself in the photography world, and she envisioned making even grander contributions to it. In order to be closer to the Fortune offices, she moved to New York City. With the help of her friends at the magazine, she managed to lease a studio on the sixty-first floor of the Chrysler Building. Bourke-White was forced to apply for a janitorial position in order to live in the city office building, but she managed to avoid any janitorial responsibilities. She applied because she wanted the best view in New York. She admitted, "I loved the view so much that I often crawled out on the gargoyles, which projected over the street 800 feet below, to take pictures of the changing moods of the city."⁷⁶ Her daring turned more than a few heads in the photography business, and it probably got her several extra jobs from curious advertising executives. Republic Steel assigned her to photograph the Empire State Building for a Saturday Evening Post advertisement. Even though the new skyscraper would rival her own home for the best view, Bourke-White willingly accepted the chance to attach her name to another eye-catching project. Joe Fewsmith, the advertising representative on the Republic account, challenged his photographer to "climb out on some of the ledges just at a set-back and take a picture looking

⁷⁶Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 80.

up."⁷⁷ Bourke-White devoted her Christmas holidays to picturing the stainless steel trim on America's tallest building. She hoped to enhance her reputation with the job, but she also needed the money to pay her rent. Maintaining the Margaret Bourke-White image proved to be costly.

Speaking engagements, advertising assignments, and movie jobs provided Bourke-White with some money, but she still struggled with her finances. She refused to give up her fashionable address and her stylish wardrobe, since she believed that these impressed her clients and drew the public's attention. In her speech notes on the subject "Careers for Women", Bourke-White advised:

It is necessary for the woman who manages her own business to bring her name before the eyes of the public in general so as to build up a reputation, to keep her work constantly before advertising executives and industrials -- who are her buyers -- and to constantly keep on tip-toe turning out something new.⁷⁸

She reiterated the importance of an artist's reputation, describing it as "the greatest selling factor."⁷⁹ The Bourke-White reputation kept her employed, but it failed to satisfy her anxious creditors. Bourke-White had outstanding debts throughout the city, from camera shops to Fifth Avenue

⁷⁷Joe Fewsmith to Bourke-White, 26 December 1930. Bourke-White Collection.

⁷⁸Typescript entitled "Careers for Women," p. 5. May 1933, Bourke-White Collection.

⁷⁹Ibid., 7.

department stores, where she continued to indulge her fine tastes. Family members had even allowed her to draw on their insurance policies in order to keep her studio open during the leanest Depression years, but by 1933, she had, according to her mother, "milked the insurance cow dry."⁸⁰ She owed hundreds of dollars to Eastman Kodak in 1934 but put off settling her account until she had equipped her new studio, a Fifth Avenue penthouse.⁸¹ (She had been forced to find a cheaper place after the Chrysler Corporation evicted her). Bourke-White considered her financial situation a minor inconvenience in an otherwise busy and exciting life. She was content to roam the United States, Europe, and Russia in search of the best scenes the industrial world had to offer. She believed that her public reputation as a professional artist would more than compensate for her mismanagement of private business affairs. The respect paid to her by colleagues was best summed up by one advertiser who introduced Bourke-White at a career conference:

If we had let us say a brand of peanuts that weren't selling very well at ten cents a bag

⁸⁰Minnie White to Bourke-White, 12 February 1933, Family Correspondence; also, Business Correspondence, 1932-34, Bourke-White Collection. The family loans caused quite a rift in the White household. In business, Bourke-White's secretaries continually asked for extensions and loans.

⁸¹Correspondence, Bourke-White Studio and Eastman Kodak Company, 1933-34, Bourke-White Collection. Peggy Sergeant, who took over the studio books in 1935, recalled that Bourke-White "was in debt to everybody," in Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 141.

because people didn't think they were worth ten cents, thought they were only five cent peanuts, usually the inevitable conference would be called, and after a half hour or so of collaboration, the conclusion of the conference would always be the same, the best thing to do would be to hire Miss Margaret Bourke-White to take a picture of the peanuts and then people would think they were worth twenty-five cents a bag.⁸²

While devoted clients depended upon Bourke-White's expertise, a few critics attacked her artistic approach. Others believed her perception of industry's dominant role in America was overrated. H. S. Bishop, an advertising executive at the Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Company, complained to Bourke-White about hearing, "What beautiful photography!" He wanted people to comment on the cars in the pictures rather than the pictures themselves.⁸³ Having worked little with the automobile industry, Bourke-White had enthusiastically taken on the Pierce-Arrow job. She loved taking pictures in the whirlwind of city traffic and saw great "possibilities" in automobile photography, but her boss did not share her point of view. He thought that Bourke-White's work was too abstract and dramatic to be functional and that she should show automobiles from a more "familiar angle of vision."⁸⁴ He concluded that the

⁸²Silverman, For the World to See, 14.

⁸³H. S. Bishop to Bourke-White, 27 August 1931, Bourke-White Collection.

⁸⁴Bishop to Bourke-White, 27 August 1931; Bourke-White to Bishop, 24 August, 1931, Bourke-White Collection. In his letter, Bishop admitted having a "Babbit point-of-view."

photographs were "much too fine a thing for advertising.... These have your favored industrial flavor, but they are not pictures that we believe would help sell Pierce-Arrows to the proletariat."⁸⁵ Bourke-White's evaluation of the American public was also challenged by movie maker David O. Selznick, who discouraged her plans to shoot industrial films. He seemed unimpressed with Bourke-White's Fortune contacts and told her that big industrial names were "absolutely valueless" in the filmmaking business. He informed Bourke-White that industry as a subject had no entertainment value, and concluded, "Work is not the most interesting idea in America.... The movie goer still goes for escape. Vogue of realism is no exception; people like some other kind of realism, not their own."⁸⁶ Bourke-White even received criticism from non-professional ranks. Members of a Boston women's club complained that the photographer had provided too much illustration and not enough talk at a luncheon speech. After hearing the comments, Bourke-White's booking agent warned her not to rely too heavily on her photographs, then he noted, "There is nothing better than a fine pictorial presentation to catch the eye and bring to mind what the realities actually are. But that is the end of the function of the

⁸⁵Bishop to Bourke-White, 27 August 1931. Bourke-White Collection.

⁸⁶"Selznick Notes," typewritten summary of Bourke-White/Selznick meeting, 11 July 1933, Bourke-White Collection.

pictures."⁸⁷ Bourke-White adamantly disagreed with her critics. She believed photography, of all media, could best describe the nature and quality of American life. And the bigger the pictures, the better.

Bourke-White's first photomural job took her to the RCA Building at Rockefeller Plaza, headquarters of the National Broadcasting Company. Bourke-White saw the mural project as an opportunity to use photography on a much grander scale. An added benefit would be the excellent publicity a prestigious location would lend to her work.⁸⁸ After identifying the photomural as "a new American art form," Bourke-White encouraged businesses to take advantage of these huge pictures by decorating their office buildings with them. She suggested in a speech to the New York Times Advertising Club that companies choose wall coverings that showed the kinds of work carried out in the offices. She further explained:

Art is too often divorced from life and, it seems such a sound idea to me to have the subject of a mural intimately tied up with the activities that go on in the company, so that it will have

⁸⁷Elbert A. Wickes to Bourke-White, 29 May 1933, Bourke-White Collection.

⁸⁸Bourke-White to Minnie White, 30 October 1933, Family Correspondence; Bourke-White to O. B. Hanson, 21 November 1933; Bourke-White to Frank Altschul, 11 December 1933; Bourke-White to Sanford Griffith, 5 January 1934, Bourke-White Collection. Personal recognition did not come as easily as Bourke-White had hoped. She competed fiercely with the mural executor, Drix Duryea, whom she referred to as "an ordinary hack commercial photographer."

real flesh and blood.⁸⁹

She believed her photomural for NBC/Radio City exemplified new directions and standards in the arena of public art. Since the theme was industry, the photographs brought people closer to processes they might not otherwise understand. The NBC photomural showed pictures of microphones, switchboards, generators, towers, and transmission tubes. Broadcasting operations could be seen in photographs covering a rotunda 160 feet around and 10 feet high. Bourke-White hoped her pictures would help unfold some of radio's mysteries. She also studied and photographed an experimental medium -- television -- inside NBC's "secret laboratories" at the Empire State Building.⁹⁰ Perhaps Bourke-White's reverence for industry and its components was best seen in her photomurals, as pictures enlarged over 100 times revealed her personal perceptions of what she considered the guiding force within American society.

Bourke-White used the NBC job as a springboard for other photomural assignments. In her appeals to Fred Black of the Ford Motor Company, she noted that a Ford mural "would cause a great deal of interest among industrialists

⁸⁹Bourke-White, Speech text for the Advertising Club of the New York Times. 16 February 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

⁹⁰Ibid.

as well as art critics."⁹¹ She pointed out how overwhelming the response had been at Radio City:

If the amount of newspaper space devoted to the NBC mural is any indication of the interest in this new art, I think that a mural using the wealth of spectacular material in the Ford Motor Co. would attract even more attention.⁹²

Bourke-White talked her way into a contract with Ford, then moved on to deliver the same pitch to General Motors. She recommended that photomurals be used in dealer displays, since the enlarged pictures would show "how adequate your factory is and with what precision General Motors operations are carried out."⁹³ Impressed with Bourke-White's earlier murals, executives at the Aluminum Company of America sent the photographer to the Midwest to take pictures for their exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair.⁹⁴ They, too, were pleased with Bourke-White's execution of the project and the

⁹¹Bourke-White to Fred L. Black, 26 February 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Bourke-White to C. P. Fiskin, 17 July 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

⁹⁴Ethel Fratkin to Felicia White, 19 April 1934, Family Correspondence; Ethel Fratkin to George R. Gibbons, 11 July 1934, Bourke-White Collection. Fratkin, Bourke-White's secretary, had assumed nearly all of the correspondence duties by 1934, and was even writing letters to the White family with Margaret's apologies that she was too busy to correspond.

attention drawn to their products as a result of her murals.⁹⁵

By mid-1934, business had begun to pick up for Bourke-White. Of the numerous solicitations she made for business in the preceding year, some had finally paid off.⁹⁶ In addition to the photomurals, she completed assignments for several popular magazines, including The Saturday Evening Post and Vanity Fair.⁹⁷ The VanBeuren Corporation, a subsidiary of RKO, bought the experimental film she had taken in 1932 on her third trip to Russia.⁹⁸ Bourke-White had hoped to sell the movie to a bigger studio as a timely connection to President Roosevelt's official recognition of the Soviet Union. She wrote to Norman Moray of Warner Brothers:

⁹⁵Safford K. Colby to Bourke-White, 9 August 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

⁹⁶See, for example, Bourke-White to Helen Resor [J. Walter Thompson Co.], 6 February 1933; Bourke-White to Frank J. Reynolds, 7 July 1933; Bourke-White to David O. Selznick, 7 July 1933; Bourke-White to R. C. Treseda [Coca-Cola Co.], 15 July 1933; Fred C. Quimby [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer], 25 October 1933, Bourke-White Collection. Bourke-White enclosed portfolios with her letters; in some cases, she included as many as fifty photographs.

⁹⁷Bourke-White Studio to J. Quigney [Colliers'], 14 August 1934, Bourke-White Collection. Bourke-White set her print prices according to the magazine's circulation: \$10 (up to 25,000), \$15 (up to 50,000), \$25 (100,000), \$35 (250,000), \$50 (500,000), and \$75 (over 1,000,000).

⁹⁸Ethel Fratkin to Minnie White, 16 February 1934; Fratkin to Felicia White, 19 April 1934. Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

The news in the papers continues to be intensely interesting.... There is every reason to believe that when the event comes it will not be a mere trade pact but full recognition and will cause the news to be extended over a much longer period than might have been true.... I believe the people in the U.S. are going to want to know what the people of this new country are like.⁹⁹

But the popular movie moguls disagreed with Bourke-White's prediction. They could not be convinced that a story about Russian life and work would attract the general public to the box office, so Bourke-White accepted the only feasible offer for her film. She worried little about it, since she kept busy with other projects and assignments. Before the year was out, she had decided to pursue yet another potential buyer for her pictures -- the federal government.

The variety of projects sponsored by the government caught Bourke-White's eye. The Roosevelt administration's New Deal programs, the Public Works Administration and the Civil Works Administration, supported everything from bridge-building to landscape painting. Max Schuster suggested that Bourke-White look into photographing the New Deal for the Treasury Department, a place that was "literally teeming with paintings and sketches by hundreds

⁹⁹Bourke-White to Norman Moray, 13 November 1933; Ralph Steiner to Bourke-White, 19 March 1933, Bourke-White Collection. Steiner asks, "How can cutting the Russian film take so long?... Russia changes fast you know -- your film may be historical rather than contemporary soon. Hurry HURRY!"

of CWA artists."¹⁰⁰ Bourke-White, however, thought that the Tennessee Valley Authority projects offered greater opportunities for her photography. Since the TVA plans included dam building, Bourke-White felt particularly qualified to document the construction. She told TVA official Arthur Morgan of her experience photographing similar works and added, "I have always thought that industrial photographs could perform a very important service in informing the public about the vital things that are happening in their country."¹⁰¹ TVA executives appeared sold until Bourke-White mentioned her rate -- five hundred dollars for ten pictures. As much as they wanted Bourke-White's expertise on the project, they could not commit government money to such an expense.¹⁰² In considering the TVA job, Bourke-White had planned to go beyond merely documenting the building process -- she wanted to record how it affected the people involved, particularly the worker's families. She called the social aspects of the project an "important American development," one that she believed

¹⁰⁰Schuster to Bourke-White, 3 April 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

¹⁰¹Bourke-White to Arthur R. Morgan, 8 March 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

¹⁰²Correspondence, Bourke-White Studio (Ethel Fratkan) and W. L. Sturdevant, 6 April to 13 April, 1934, Bourke-White Collection. Sturdevant's last telegram read, "Regret that Photos you mention are quite beyond our means."

would "catch the public imagination."¹⁰³ Bourke-White was finally willing to give equal time to a subject she had previously ignored -- the human element. At age thirty, she showed signs of developing a social conscience.

In her autobiography, Bourke-White admitted, "When I was discovering the beauty of industrial shapes, people were only incidental to me... I had not much feeling for them."¹⁰⁴ She claimed to have experienced a change of heart after going on a Fortune assignment to the drought-stricken Great Plains. Recalling its impact, she wrote:

I had never seen people caught helpless like this in total tragedy. They had no defense. They had no plan. They were numbed like their own dumb animals, and many of these animals were choking and dying in drifting soil.¹⁰⁵

The pictures Bourke-White took of the survivors revealed hard, pathetic faces. She failed to capture the remaining strength of an individual ravaged by financial and environmental disaster. Where Dorothea Lange had illuminated what was left of human dignity amidst horrible circumstances, Bourke-White focussed on what had been stripped away. In Lange's photographs, the spirit survived; in Bourke-White's, it had disintegrated, much like

¹⁰³Bourke-White to Morgan, 8 March 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

¹⁰⁴Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 110.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

the eroded soil. Although she would spend the next few years picturing people, Bourke-White rarely managed to accept what they offered to the camera. The tactics of persuasion she had nurtured as an advertising photographer remained deeply ingrained. In her attempts to show Depression poverty to the American public, Bourke-White overstated her case. Just as she had dramatized sunlit steel on the Chrysler Building gargoyles, she captured faces blinded by harsh artificial light. She stood or crouched at odd angles in order to record the human condition from a different, and sometimes disturbing, perspective. The resulting photographs often showed people at their basest level, similar to the farm animals Bourke-White had compared them to. The photographer's shift in focus, from machines to humans, proved an arduous task. But she attempted to bridge the gap by concentrating on people's lives. She began contributing her time and her pictures to various campaigns aimed at improving social conditions.

Numerous groups solicited Bourke-White's support. In January 1934, she donated pictures to a San Francisco exhibit designed to raise money for the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners.¹⁰⁶ She gave photographs to the New School for Social Research and

¹⁰⁶Langston Hughes to Bourke-White, 23 December 1933; Bourke-White to Lincoln Steffens, 26 January 1934. Bourke-White Collection.

lectured at the New Workers School.¹⁰⁷ Bourke-White joined Dorothy Day, Josephine Herbst, Mary R. Beard, and others in the League of Women Shoppers, a group that supported organized labor protests and other activities to abolish "sweat shop conditions" in factories and stores.¹⁰⁸ She served as a major sponsor for the Film and Photo League, along with Ralph Steiner, Berenice Abbott, Reginald Marsh, and Lee Strassberg. The League sought to educate the public and raise social consciousness about the interests and concerns of the working class.¹⁰⁹ But the group Bourke-White felt most strongly about was the American Artists' Congress, a coalition designed to protect cultural freedom by supporting artists in their political convictions. She wrote to several other photographers, asking for their participation in the Congress and alerting them:

...[S]uch reactionary tendencies as have appeared in the form of censorship and destruction of works of art, and in the suppression of civil liberties, are symptomatic of more serious conditions

¹⁰⁷Lists of donated photographs, April-May 1934; Ray Michael to Bourke-White, 7 May 1934, Bourke-White Collection.

¹⁰⁸Correspondence, Bourke-White and The League of Women Shoppers, 1935-39, Bourke-White Collection.

¹⁰⁹Program, "First Annual Motion Picture and Costume Ball by the Film and Photo League," 27 April 1934; Albert Carroll to Bourke-White, 10 December 1934, Bourke-White Collection. Bourke-White donated pictures for the costume ball's accompanying photo exhibit.

to come. It can happen here....110

By directing her energies into worthy causes. Bourke-White developed a side of herself previously neglected. As her biographer has pointed out, "In the twenties, Margaret lost her innocence; in the thirties, her indifference."111

No doubt the change in attitude and outlook motivated Bourke-White to accept an offer from controversial author Erskine Caldwell. For his next project, Caldwell sought to hire "the best photographer available."112 He intended to make a thorough evaluation of the American South in order to prove that the scenes portrayed in his best-selling novel and long-running Broadway play, Tobacco Road, were authentic. Critics and censors had railed against Caldwell's fiction, stories that depicted the South in terms of its worst trademarks -- illiteracy, racism, and poverty. He hoped to change their minds with a new piece of non-fiction, filled with telling photographs. Several months in advance, he asked Bourke-White to meet him in Georgia in early July, 1936. She accepted his offer with enthusiasm, and replied to him:

110Bourke-White to Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, Alfred Steiglitz, Anton Bruehl, Edward Steichen, 7 November 1935. Bourke-White Collection.

111Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography. 157.

112Robert E. Snyder, "Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White: You Have Seen Their Faces," in Prospects: The Annual of American Cultural Studies 11 (1987): 396.

I am happier about this than I can say! If I had a chance to choose from every living writer in America I would choose you first as the person I would like to do such a book with.... Just when I have decided that I want to take pictures that are close to life -- seems almost too good to be true.¹¹³

From spring until summer Bourke-White stayed quite busy with advertising jobs, including a stint in South America for the American Can Company. Business affairs kept her in New York just long enough to delay her arrival in Augusta, Georgia, by a few days. When Caldwell threatened to find someone else for the project, Bourke-White smoothed it over with a letter to him explaining her need "to carry the overhead while doing a really creative and socially important job like the book with you."¹¹⁴ Caldwell softened. He and Bourke-White started their journey together the next day.

The duo travelled through Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, and South Carolina, to find substance for their enterprise. In two trips, one in the summer of 1936, the other in March of 1937, Bourke-White and Caldwell gathered enough evidence to publish a book that received immediate recognition. Shocking and

¹¹³Bourke-White to Caldwell, 9 March 1936, Selected Papers of Erskine Caldwell, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University (hereafter cited as Caldwell Papers, Syracuse).

¹¹⁴Bourke-White to Caldwell, undated letter. Bourke-White Collection. She discusses the incident and the letter in Portrait of Myself, 199-121.

sensationalist, You Have Seen Their Faces, revealed human despair at its lowest level. As Robert Snyder has pointed out, Bourke-White and Caldwell chose "only the material that sustained certain images of the South, and set the rest aside."¹¹⁵ Bourke-White used her camera as an instrument of manipulation, skewing the image of a face or a scene to fit her purposes. Likewise, Caldwell employed the same techniques in his reportage, over-generalizing the tenant farming situation as a horrid, sorrow-filled existence that survived "only by feeding upon itself, like an animal in a trap eating its own flesh and bone."¹¹⁶ His prose described an exhausted South, filled with tyrannical landlords, lazy white farmers, and hopeless blacks.¹¹⁷ Vanderbilt "Fugitive" poet Donald Davidson argued that Caldwell had overemphasized the negative aspects of Southern life and ignored the rest, much as H. L. Mencken and Clarence Darrow

¹¹⁵Snyder, "Caldwell and Bourke-White," 398.

¹¹⁶Ersine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, You Have Seen Their Faces (New York: Viking Press, 1937), 75.

¹¹⁷See William Stott's discussion of the "Documentary Book," in Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 211-237; also, Hank O'Neal, A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of American and its People, 1935-1943 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 176; and, Burl Noggle, "With Pen and Camera: In Quest of the American South in the 1930s," in The South is Another Land: Essays on the Twentieth-Century South, ed. Bruce Clayton and John A. Salmond (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987).

had done years earlier.¹¹⁸ After cultivating the art of persuasion for nearly a decade, Bourke-White had put her talents to work using people, instead of machines, as subjects. A master at molding public opinion, she delivered the side of the story she wanted Americans to see.¹¹⁹ Even those unable to read the captions could understand Bourke-White's pictures. She was thousands of miles from Madison Avenue, yet still cleverly "selling" her story.

While still working with Caldwell, Bourke-White joined the staff of Life magazine, Henry Luce's newest venture. In her contract she agreed to "work exclusively for TIME Inc." on the condition that she receive two months leave of absence each year to pursue independent projects.¹²⁰ Life offered Bourke-White an excitement different from that of advertising; it was a weekly publication that kept its photographers on the road, looking for the next newsbreaking story. For Bourke-White, the thrilling pace equalled her earlier adventures atop city skyscrapers. Caldwell did not

¹¹⁸Donald Davidson, "Erskine Caldwell's Picture Book," The Southern Review 4 (1938/1939), 15-25.

¹¹⁹In Portrait of Myself, Bourke-White explained how she and Caldwell developed captions for the photographs in You Have Seen Their Faces. They did not use actual quotes from people in the pictures; instead, they composed the captions themselves. Bourke-White recalled, "Many times the final caption was a combination of the two -- the thought mine and the words Erskine's, or vice versa.... I was proud indeed when either my thought or my way of expressing the subject stood up in the final test." (p. 137).

¹²⁰Contract agreement between Margaret Bourke-White and Time, Inc., 4 September 1936. Bourke-White Collection.

share Bourke-White's enthusiasm. He had fallen in love with the photographer on their Southern journey and was disappointed that Life assignments demanded so much of her time. Bourke-White acknowledged Caldwell's displeasure and recalled, "Erskine had a very difficult attitude toward my magazine, a kind of jealousy....¹²¹ His insecurities mounted as Bourke-White built upon her stellar reputation. One of her Fort Peck Dam photographs graced the cover of Life's first issue, published in November, 1936. The subject belonged to Bourke-White -- the dam was a symbol of American strength achieved through technological advance. The job marked the beginning of yet another fulfilling relationship between Bourke-White and the Luce organization.

Varied assignments, full itineraries, and cross-country travel kept Bourke-White busy in the late 1930s. She wrote to a friend, "I'm hardly back in New York before a new assignment takes me away again."¹²² Bourke-White had to turn down numerous speaking engagements since she remained on call for the magazine.¹²³ Life's popularity brought attention to her photographs, just as the pictures brought

¹²¹Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 169.

¹²²Bourke-White, quoted in Silverman, For the World to See, 81.

¹²³Bourke-White to Louis Lozowick, 22 May 1937, Bourke-White Collection. She explains, "Since I've gone into this work with Life I find it almost impossible to schedule discussions ahead of time...." Bourke-White's office correspondence reveals that she agreed to speak or lecture only if an organization also scheduled a replacement for her.

buyers to the newsstands. Contemporary critic Halla Beloff has argued that Life made its photographer a "recording angel," one who showed America what it wanted to see of itself. In Beloff's opinion, Bourke-White, as a "visual politician," reinforced the dominant culture by emphasizing "the themes of opportunity, equality, the protestant ethic, and amelioration."¹²⁴ Life did attempt to show the public what ordinary Americans were doing on a day-to-day basis, but its stories and pictures covered a wide variety of subjects, from papermaking to slum clearance to Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt's needlework.¹²⁵ The magazine, which rarely covered controversial topics, received its most heated criticism for a pictorial essay on human birth. A friend wrote to Bourke-White, "You know by now that Life was banned from half a dozen cities and states for telling the world where babies came from."¹²⁶ Otherwise, Life and its star photographer heard praise. From the East Coast high art establishment to the Hollywood movie studios, critics and clients and interested onlookers applauded Bourke-White's work. Beaumont Newhall, of the Museum of Modern Art, congratulated the photographer for her "superb series"

¹²⁴Halla Beloff, Camera Culture (New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1985), 40.

¹²⁵Listing of Bourke-White's Life Assignments, Index Notebook, Bourke-White Collection.

¹²⁶Paul Peters to Bourke-White, 17 April 1938, Bourke-White Collection.

of 'Middletown.' Identifying it as "the finest piece of documentary photography" he had seen, Newhall described the essay as "embracing...thorough...[and] brilliant from a photographic standpoint."¹²⁷ Her work at MGM and other movie sets also received excellent reviews:

Bourke-White's shots have arrived and those taken on the Rosalie set are breath-taking. Boy, this will show the studios how pictures should be taken....

Let her take anything she sees which she thinks good, regardless of the stories we may outline for her.¹²⁸

Enjoying the adventures Life offered, Bourke-White devoted herself to the magazine. When Caldwell realized his competition with Life for his lover's attention was growing more intense, he pressured the photographer to marry him. After many months, she relented, challenging the advice of a friend who said, "I have serious doubts regarding the alleged worth of monogamy to those who lead nomadic lives."¹²⁹

When Life sent Bourke-White to Europe to take pictures of ordinary citizens coping with war, Caldwell remained at home. Although he had accompanied her on assignment to

¹²⁷New Hall to Bourke-White, 10 May 1937, Bourke-White Collection.

¹²⁸Office Memo, Joe Thorndike to Alan Brown, 18 October 1937, Bourke-White Collection.

¹²⁹Guy E. Rhoades to Bourke-White, 30 November [1937], Bourke-White Collection.

Czechoslovakia in 1938, he stayed behind in the fall of 1939. War had changed everything. Well behind the front lines, Caldwell's wife was considered a valuable asset, one who was "counted on to cut much red tape."¹³⁰ Due to the nature of her work, she had to be ready to move on a moment's notice. Caldwell's presence might pose problems or cause delays. During her six months overseas, Bourke-White received numerous letters from her husband, who begged her to return to the states. He appealed for the sake of his reputation, her reputation, even the prospect of a future child. In December, 1939, Caldwell sent Bourke-White a newspaper clipping about Marion Post, a young government photographer making her way through the South. He warned:

The young lady in the enclosed clipping is kicking up a lot of dust around the country, and I dislike seeing her getting so much glory.... I can't help reading the handwriting on the wall! To wit -- to your everlasting glory you should make haste to get back here & do those books....¹³¹

Caldwell regretted Bourke-White's insatiable appetite for grabbing the latest story. He wanted her fame to rest on something more permanent, and wrote to her, "Books, like objects of art, are not thrown away like the morning

¹³⁰Margaret Smith to Ruth White, 19 October 1939, Family Correspondence, Bourke-White Collection.

¹³¹Caldwell to Bourke-White, 2 December 1939. Caldwell Papers, Syracuse.

paper."¹³² But the adventures granted to a foreign news photographer were too alluring for Bourke-White to pass up. If industry had offered the greatest excitement in the late twenties, war offered the same in the late thirties. Life had sparked Bourke-White's interest in photojournalism, and she was determined to participate. She continued to give the American people the images they expected. By 1941, they had turned away from domestic concerns to focus on military preparedness. Bourke-White knew what would sell, and she planned to provide it.

In the spring of 1941, Bourke-White toured China and the Soviet Union with Caldwell at her side. After a brief stint back in the United States, she crossed the ocean again as a war correspondent for the U.S. Air Force. Caldwell stayed behind, and the two officially separated. Rather than carry on a long-distance relationship, he asked for a divorce. Bourke-White wrote to her lawyer:

My one feeling was relief. I have felt for so long that such a disproportionate amount of my attention went into worrying about whether someone was in a good mood or not, whether he would be courteous or forbidding to others, whether day to day life would be livable at all on normal terms. that I am delighted to drop all such problems for the more productive one of photography.

In a world like this I simply cannot bear being away from things that happen. I think it would be a mistake for me not to be recording the march of

¹³²Ibid.; Also. William L. Howard. "Dear Kit, Dear Skinny: The Letters of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White." Syracuse University Library Associates Courier XXIII (Fall, 1988): 23-44.

events with my camera....133

Bourke-White stayed Europe to photograph the war.

For Bourke-White, photography and adventure were bound together. Early in her career, she had mastered the logistics of the medium -- how to use lights, pose models, and manipulate backgrounds to achieve a desired effect. But she considered another source of control even more important than the mechanics of photography. She wrote in an article for the Nation that "the photographer's point of view" stood paramount. She insisted that certain questions be answered about a photographer, including, "How alive is he? Does he know what is happening in the world? How sensitive has he become during the course of his own photographic development to the world-shaking changes in the social scene about him?"¹³⁴ Bourke-White was willing to embrace the changes, and if she encountered dangers along the way, all the better. Always flexible, she focussed on what was popular. In the course of mirroring the age, she recorded a substantial number of its most memorable images. Nearly all were marked with the Bourke-White flair.

¹³³Bourke-White, quoted in Goldberg, Bourke-White Biography, 255.

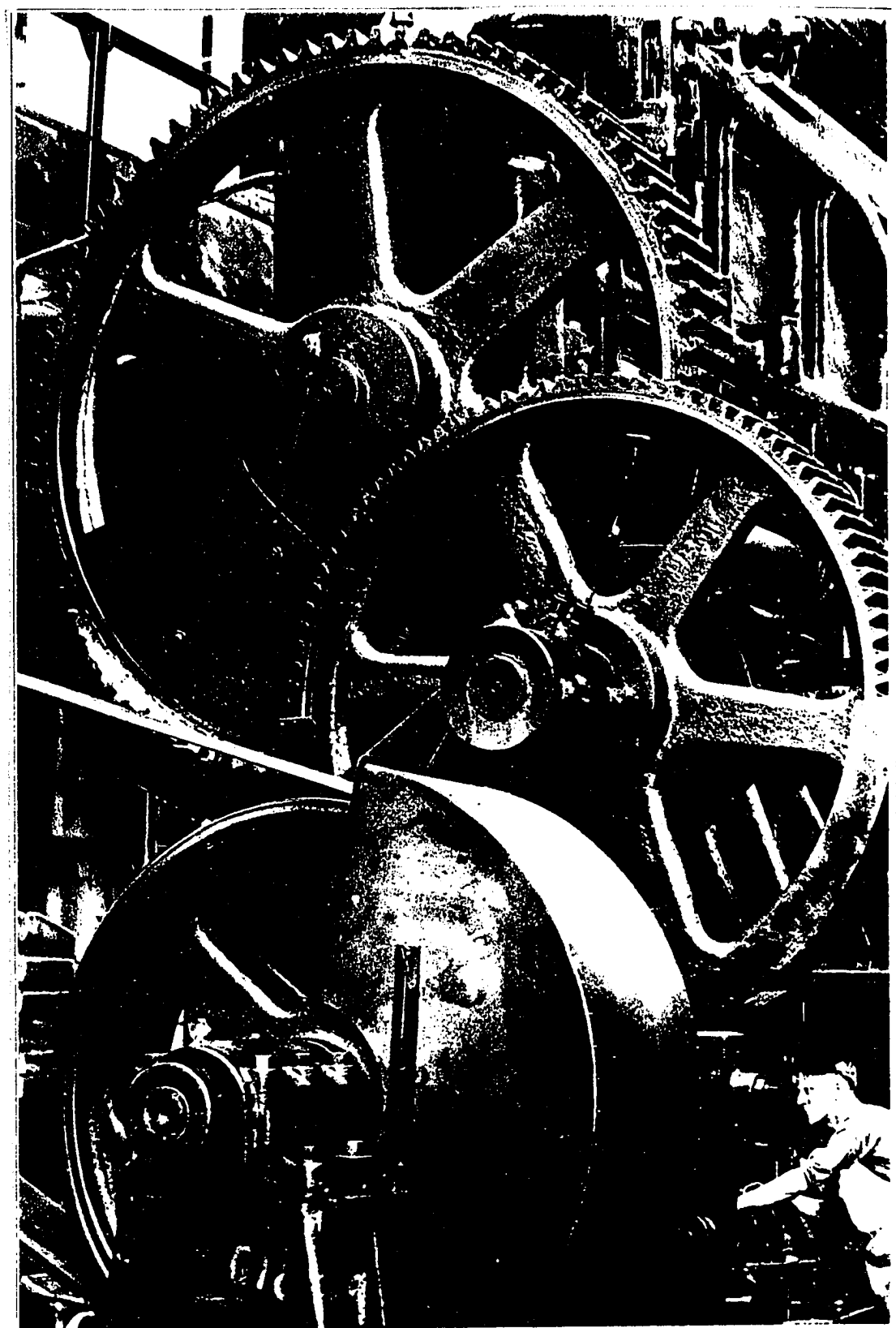
¹³⁴Typescript notes for Nation, 29 January 1936, Bourke-White Collection.

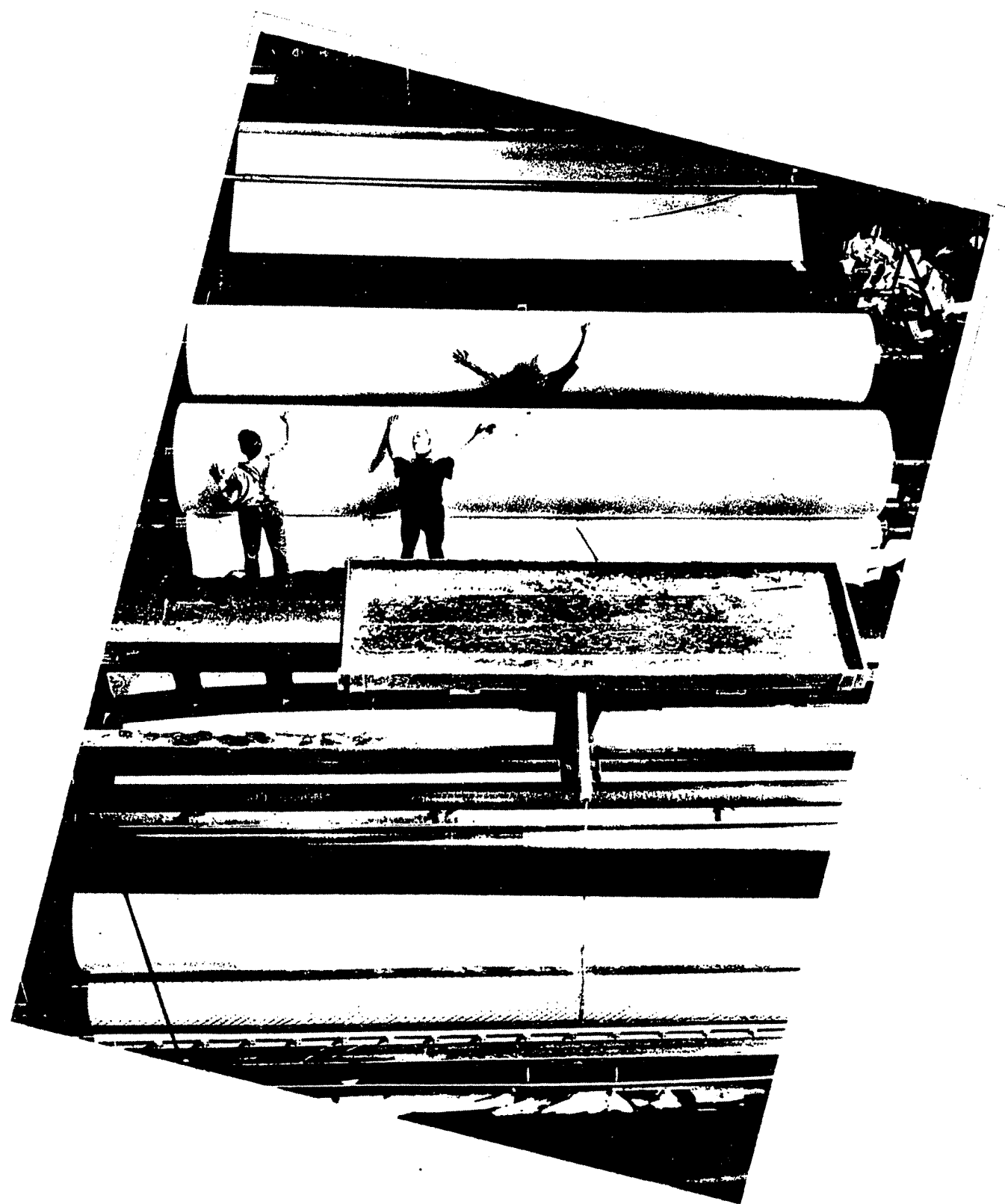
AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS





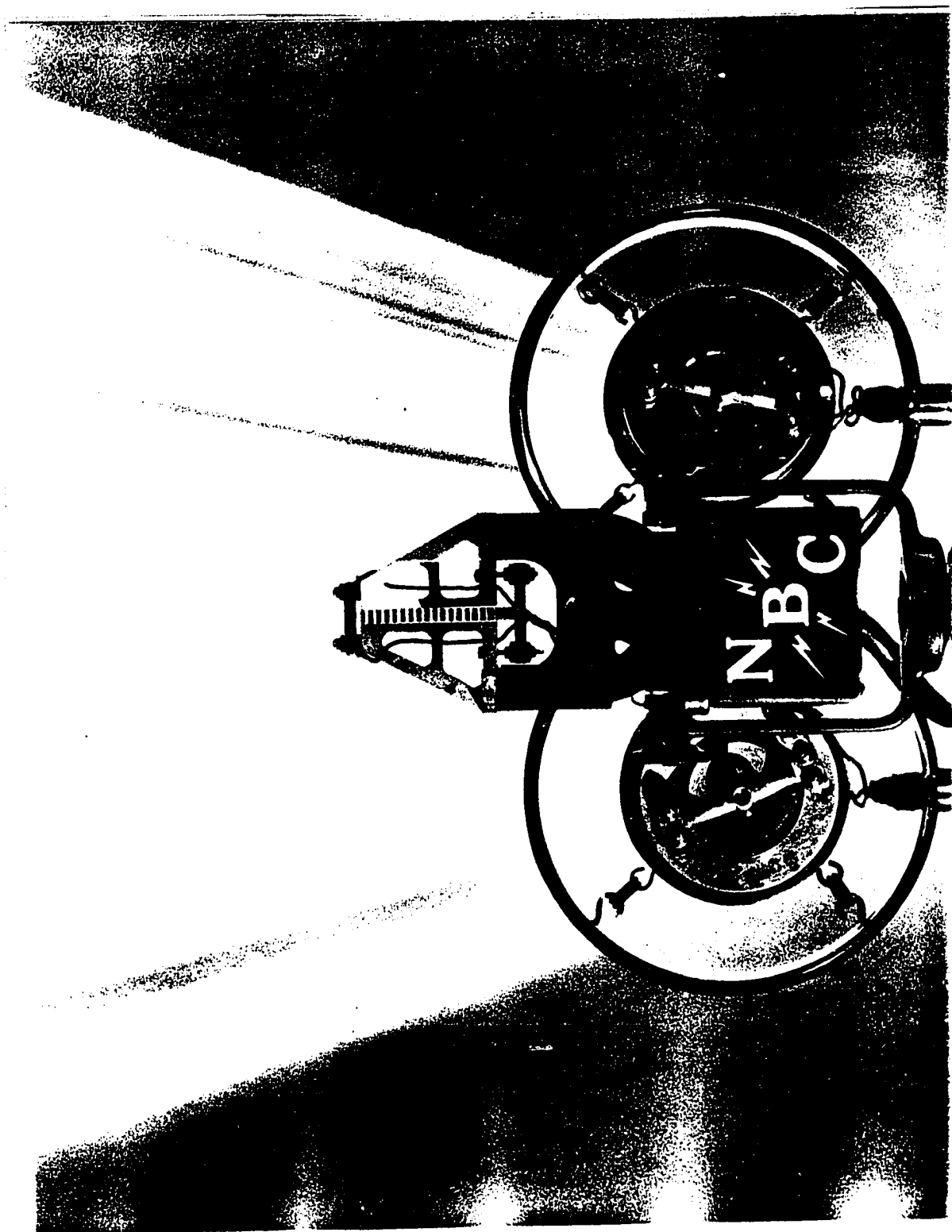






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"You Have Seen Their Faces"



FROM OLD TO NEW: TRANSATLANTIC REBIRTH

If I had never left America, I would never have wanted to photograph New York. But when I saw it with fresh eyes, I knew it was my country, something I had to set down in photographs.

Berenice Abbott

When a New Deal project official first saw Berenice Abbott's Bowery pictures, he warned her that nice girls should stay out of certain New York City neighborhoods. Abbott answered, "I'm not a nice girl. I'm a photographer."¹ The succinct reply spoke well of Abbott's no-nonsense view of herself and her profession. The woman who intended to document the preeminent American city would not limit herself to its beautiful facades and attractive residents. Her project was grand in scale, one that captured the whole city -- its energy, its character, and its fluid nature -- on film. Abbott hoped to comb Manhattan from Harlem to the Brooklyn Bridge. She wanted to record what was there, never to create illusions. Her camera practices kept her from joining the Alfred Stieglitz followers, a group she evaluated as a "powerful cult" guided by one man's "stupendous ego."² The Pictorialists, in

¹Abbott, quoted in Hank O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 18.

²Alice C. Steinbach, "Berenice Abbott's Point of View." An interview with Berenice Abbott, Art in America (November/December 1976): 78; also, Avis Berman, "The Unflinching Eye

Abbott's opinion, made "pleasant, pretty, artificial pictures in the superficial spirit of certain minor painters."³ Since Abbott made no pretenses about her work, New York's "artsy" photographic circles chose not to include her. She succeeded in spite of them. Her work stood on its own, free from the inevitable affectations that accompanied other photographers' serious aesthetic philosophies. Abbott's pictures exuded the simple values she deemed most important -- "a relentless fidelity to fact [and] a deep love of the subject for its own sake...."⁴ Abbott clung to these principles, even though a more popular perspective might have brought her greater recognition or more money.

Abbott first experienced New York as a nineteen-year-old journalism student. Like many other midwesterners, she had left her Ohio home in search of opportunities the urban life offered. She intended to leave behind memories of an unhappy childhood, a "fragmented family," and a dull, freshman routine at Ohio State University. She changed the spelling of her first name because, as she explained, "I didn't like Bernice.... Burnees. So I put in another

of Berenice Abbott, Art News 80 (January 1981): 88. Abbott told Berman, "He [Stieglitz] took about five good pictures in his whole life, and that was only when he ventured out of himself."

³Abbott, quoted in Berman, "The Unflinching Eye," 88.

⁴Berenice Abbott, "Photographer As Artist," Art Front 16 (1936): 7.

letter. Made it sound better."⁵ In the winter of 1918, she borrowed twenty dollars to buy a train ticket to New York. The friend who lent Abbott the money also gave her a place to sleep in a spacious Greenwich Village apartment. Abbott found herself surrounded by artists, actors, and playwrights, many of whom started their work days at dusk. Their late nights often ended in raucous neighborhood parties, where Abbott's shyness cast her in the minority. But after convincing herself that the life of an artist offered greater satisfaction than a career in journalism, Abbott dropped out of Columbia University, which she considered "a hell of a sausage factory."⁶ Admitting she would have made "a very poor journalist," Abbott attributed her initial choice of field to youth's uneasiness, the inescapable grappling for personal identity.⁷

To support herself, Abbott took on a variety of jobs, from secretary to waitress to yarn dyer. She dabbled in acting and landed parts -- one a small role in Eugene O'Neill's The Moon of the Caribbees -- with the famed Provincetown Players. While struggling to find her niche in

⁵Erla Zwingle, "A Life of Her Own." American Photographer 16 (April, 1986): 57.

⁶Margaretta K. Mitchell, ed., Recollections: Ten Women of Photography, published in conjunction with the International Center of Photography's exhibition of the same name, (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 12. Since the exhibit surveyed only living photographers, each woman provided her own biographical sketch for the publication.

⁷Steinbach, Abbott interview, 78.

the art world, Abbott decided to cultivate her interest in sculpture. She moved away from her acquaintances and the night life in Greenwich Village to live alone as an artist. While making little money at her craft, she noticed that other artists in the city focussed on how much profit their works would bring. Fiercely independent, Abbott would not compromise her principles for the sake of a sale. She craved an atmosphere more conducive to creativity, and with encouragement from her friend, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Abbott decided to study in Paris. She explained her dissatisfaction with both the immediate community and the larger country that surrounded her:

I was scared of New York, scared of America....
I wasn't commercial. I never dreamed about how
much money I could make -- it never even occurred
to me. And America was so commercial, that's why
I left it.⁸

As a young, carefree artist, Abbott had little to lose by starting over in another place. Of the move to Paris, she remembered thinking, "I may as well be poor there as poor here."⁹ Although she failed to realize it at the time, the environments Abbott chose to work in throughout her career would become either allies or enemies, inspirational havens or desolate grounds. Her surroundings were vital to the art she created.

⁸Zwingle, "Life of Her Own," 57.

⁹Mitchell, Recollections, 12.

Veritably unambitious, Abbott bought a one-way ticket to Paris. She recalled, "In March 1921 I set sail on the great big sea, like Ulysses, and I said to myself, 'Whatever happens, happens.'"¹⁰ For two years, as Abbott struggled to develop her sculpting talents, she held down a variety of jobs to support herself. She often posed for other sculptors and painters in order to make money.¹¹ Even if her sculpture failed to furnish the income she had hoped for, Paris offered the working atmosphere she had craved. Abbott explained:

Paris had a quality in those days that you can't have in an overcrowded place. People were more people. No one was rushed. There were no rubber stamps among us. We had the illusion that we could go ahead and do our work, and that nothing would ever come along to stop us. We were completely liberated.¹²

Abbott's friends belonged to the American and British expatriate circles who huddled on Paris' left bank. Most were writers or painters or patrons of the arts. Leslie George Katz described them as a "community of congenial individuals" who discovered their most meaningful expression through the vehicle of the arts. He explained that, "in the practice of the arts a person acting as an individual, a

¹⁰John Russell, "A Still Life in Maine," The New York Times, 16 November 1980, 70.

¹¹O'Neal, Bernice Abbott: American Photographer, 9.

¹²Abbott, quoted in Russell, "A Still Life," 70.

loner exploring a commitment to a craft, could hope to express thereby the vernacular total of human experience."¹³ Unfortunately, Abbott failed to reach a satisfying level of expression with her sculpture. Even if she had escaped the commercialism in America, she remained discontented with the European art world. Combined with her lack of commitment, Abbott's personal dissatisfaction led her to abandon sculpture. After two years of study and practice, she willingly gave up her dream and went to work fulltime as an assistant to photographer Man Ray.

When Man Ray discovered that Abbott knew nothing about photography, he immediately hired her to print his negatives. He wanted to train her to develop negatives using his vision instead of her own. He realized that he could mold the inexperienced young sculptor and pay her very little while she learned the trade. Abbott surprised herself and her boss by readily mastering darkroom techniques. She employed her artistic skills in order to sculpt the faces in Man Ray's portraits. Abbott's keen ability to see "white, gray, and black" helped her to print

¹³Leslie George Katz, keynote address, presentation to Berenice Abbott -- the Association of International Photography Art Dealers' Annual Award for Significant Contributions to the Field of Photography, 6 November 1981, transcript, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

realistic likenesses.¹⁴ Biographer Hank O'Neal has pointed out that Abbott produced a stunning "three-dimensional effect" on paper, a pleasant consequence that attracted even more patrons to Man Ray's already-popular portrait studio.¹⁵ For two years Abbott worked closely with Man Ray's negatives, but she never observed his methods with sitters. All she witnessed emerged on film emulsion in the darkroom. After developing hundreds of portraits, Abbott came to the conclusion that her employer overlooked the aspect of character in his women sitters -- "Man Ray took magnificent portraits of men, but nearly all of his women were beautiful objects, beautiful still lifes," she observed.¹⁶ Perhaps the long hours she spent alone developing, printing, and critically studying Man Ray's work encouraged Abbott to try her own hand with a camera. He showed her how to operate the machine, and soon afterward she began taking photographs of her friends during her lunch break. To support her small business, she made a deal with Man Ray to subtract the cost of the supplies she used from her daily pay. Abbott noted, "Eventually I was paying him more than he was paying me and that's when it started to become a

¹⁴"From A Student's Notebook," Popular Photography 21 (1947): 56, 174. Abbott stressed the importance of training the eye and noted that "tones must be viewed instead of colors."

¹⁵O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 10.

¹⁶Mitchell, Recollections, 12.

problem."¹⁷ As Abbott took more and more photographs, her satisfied customers helped to build her reputation by word of mouth. When one of Man Ray's appointments asked for Abbott to take her portrait, the tension in the studio mounted further. Abbott decided to resign rather than to continue working in a hostile environment. Although Man Ray had been the only photographer Abbott had known and the two had worked together closely, their respective portraiture styles displayed few similarities. Producing work that best fit within the surrealist tradition, Man Ray was once described as "the wittiest juggler the camera has ever known."¹⁸ Abbott's tastes and methods could not have been more different. A rapport between photographer and subject was evident in her pictures but absent in his. The relationships Abbott forged with her sitters resulted in some of the most lively, most poignant, and most haunting photographs to come out of Twenties Paris.

In 1926 two loyal patrons, Peggy Guggenheim and Robert McAlmon, loaned Abbott enough money to set up her own studio. Out of it came pictures of faces that were real, not stiff. Abbott took her time with her sitters and allowed them to "be themselves."¹⁹ She considered each

¹⁷Abbott, quoted in O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 10.

¹⁸John Canaday, in his introduction to O'Neal. Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 7.

¹⁹Mitchell, Recollections, 12.

subject so important that she took only one person a day. Ample time for interaction between the photographer and the sitter was vital since, in Abbott's opinion, only a comfortable session would reveal true character. Abbott explained, "I wasn't trying to make a still life of them...but a person. It's a kind of exchange between people -- it has to be -- and I enjoyed it."²⁰ One critic has said of Abbott's Paris portraits, "The sitters are her peers. her accomplices, her friends, her heroes. They sit for her as her equals, one to one."²¹ And they participated. Abbott elected not to pose her subjects; instead, she allowed them to strike their own poses. Some dressed up, while others appeared in casual clothes; they looked at the camera, away from it, some with joyous smiles, a few with introspective gazes. Abbott treated each one differently, and started every session as if she "had never taken a photograph before."²² She left flattery to other portraitists as she attempted to offer only clear, honest expressions of face. She once told a group of students to avoid the "photographed expression" when making pictures of people. Abbott believed

²⁰Steinbach, Abbott interview, 79; also, Berenice Abbott, Exhibition catalogue, "Berenice Abbott: The 20s and the 30s," with an introductory essay by Barbara Shissler Nosanow, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1982), n.p.

²¹Katz, International Photography Art Dealers' Address.

²²Abbott, quoted in O'Neal. Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 46.

such a conscious effort would help maintain the inherent dignity present in humanity.²³ Of the Paris portraits, one critic noted, "There is no irony or facile cleverness in them. They are friendly and admiring, yet they never strike a false note."²⁴ Among the faces are a tired James Joyce, a pensive Nora Joyce, and an energetic Jean Cocteau. Bookseller Sylvia Beach appears unassuming in her raincoat, and Princess Eugene Murat, all-knowing and unshakable. Coco Chanel, Leo Stein, Marie Laurencin, Janet Flanner, and many others offered Abbott their faces and their souls for a day. They admired her work and helped make her a successful artist in a city that had not wholeheartedly brought photographers up to the level that painters, sculptors, and writers enjoyed. From the beginning, Abbott set her standards high and never wavered -- she decided "not to advertise, seek out clients, or take photographs for free."²⁵

Abbott found it easy to follow her three basic rules while working in Paris. She ran a prosperous business supported by clients who admired her photography. In turn, she respected her sitters and their myriad artistic and

²³"From A Student's Notebook," 56, 174; also, Berenice Abbott, Photographs, foreword by Muriel Rukeyser, introduction by David Vestal, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 15.

²⁴Hilton Kramer, "Vanished City life By Berenice Abbott on View," The New York Times, 27 November 1981.

²⁵Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 11.

literary endeavors. She found the comfortably wealthy women particularly fascinating and once said, "People can be great in themselves, and not for what they do. There were women in the 1920's who knew how to live doing nothing, just pouring tea or going to the store."²⁶ For Abbott, Paris was defined by its people, not its landmarks, its palaces, or its history. And of all the Parisians and exiled Americans and others who inhabited the city, none interested Abbott more than the photographer Eugene Atget. She had seen a few of Atget's pictures in Man Ray's studio, and desperately wanted to meet the creator. When she discovered that Atget lived just up the street from the studio, she ran out to find him. Beyond the apartment door, Abbott found a "tired, sad, remote" man, yet one who was curiously appealing.²⁷ She befriended him, studied his photographic techniques, and bought as many of his prints as she could afford. Long after Abbott's split with Man Ray, she continued to visit Atget in hopes of learning all she could from the master photographer. Unfortunately, she was one of the few who recognized his talent. Fellow Parisians, who had considered Atget a spy after the Great War began, cast him

²⁶Abbott, quoted in Russell, "A Still Life in Maine," 70.

²⁷Berenice Abbott, undated typewritten transcript, "Eugene Atget," Marchal Landgren Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

aside.²⁸ They found him mysterious, a strange character toting around a large camera and dark cloth. The man who focussed on doorways, street signs, and shopkeeper's windows rather than people seemed an oddity in twenties' Paris. Atget once told Abbott that the only people who appreciated his work were "young foreigners."²⁹ By some ironic twist, the place and people who had allowed a young American woman to succeed in photography had consciously ignored one of their own geniuses. Abbott attempted to even the score by preserving Atget's work. The task marked her first move away from portraiture.

In the year following Atget's death, Abbott managed to convince his closest friend, Andre Calmettes, to sell Atget's photograph collection to her. The fifteen hundred glass plates and thousands of prints revealed to Abbott the extent of Atget's dedication to his City of Paris project. Begun in 1898, he had spent nearly thirty years carrying his 18 x 24 cm view camera, tripod, glass plates, and covers into every corner of the city and its environs. He completed what Abbott called a "poetic epic", one that included pictures of balconies, store fronts, churches, signs, fountains, parks, and buildings, among other

²⁸Ibid.; also, Berenice Abbott, "Eugene Atget," The Complete Photographer 6 (1941), rep. in The Encyclopedia of Photography 2 (1963): 336.

²⁹Abbott, "Atget" transcript, Landgren Papers.

things.³⁰ With a careful attention to detail and a strict sense of realism, Atget sought to capture the essence of the city. Abbott, deeply moved by the photographer's vision and impressed with his ability to record it, described Atget's passion:

He was obsessed by the materials of existence, the substances in which life is given form. The cobblestones of streets, the moulting limestone of houses, the bark and leaves of trees, the luster of berries, the gloss of rose petals, crumbling earth in plowed fields, marble fountains in landscaped esplanades -- all these qualities and a million more controlled his imagination.³¹

Atget had elected to document a city in transition, one moving out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. The Paris he had known as a young man was fading, as the fin de siècle trends creeped in to modernize the city and its people. The romantic air of Delacroix's Paris and the stately manners of Manet's Parisians gradually disappeared as the sounds and sights provided by Picasso, Stravinsky, and Diaghilev demanded more of the public's attention. Atget hoped to preserve the old before it died completely, but he attempted to document what existed rather than to create a nostalgic, false front around the vanishing elements. His theme, according to Abbott, was "society, its facades and bourgeois interiors, its incredible contrasts

³⁰Abbott, "Eugene Atget." The Complete Photographer, 337.

³¹Ibid.

and paradoxes....the vast scope of this world. the changing 19th century world."³² In 1928, Abbott began the arduous task of promoting Atget's name and his vision. In her opinion, his contributions to the field placed him within the ranks of the world's greatest photographers. Convincing others to share her convictions and to recognize Atget would be a long, difficult endeavor, one she never abandoned.

Inspired by Atget's pictures, Abbott unknowingly began laying the groundwork for a similar project of her own, one that would later take her away from Paris indefinitely. She continued to make portraits in the late 1920s, but she also began taking some of her first outdoor photographs during those years. If Atget's work had measured anything, it was the importance of the present moment, the surrounding world. With his selective eye, Atget had shown Abbott the inherent value in observing the external. Although Abbott had focussed solely on the internal --human personalities -- in her studio portraiture, she came to appreciate Atget's point of view, what she called "realism unadorned."³³ Just a few months after she bought his photograph collection, Abbott made a trip back to New York, the place she had rebelled against a decade earlier. She immediately fell in love with the city -- "I knew that I couldn't go back to Paris. Here

³²Abbott, "Photographer As Artist," 6.

³³Berenice Abbott, The World of Atget (New York: Horizon Press, 1964).

I was, in the most complicated city in the most complicated country on earth, and I knew that that was where I had to stay," Abbott remembered.³⁴ A yearning to rediscover her roots had led Abbott back to the United States, yet she never expected to feel so overwhelmed upon return.³⁵ The vitality of New York City attracted her. Her newfound appreciation for realism in art made her realize what tremendous possibilities the city offered as a subject. Atget may have planted the seed, but New York itself brought Abbott back. She returned to Paris just long enough to trade her furniture and pack up the Atget collection for shipping. She left behind in Paris the Dadaists, the constructivists, the surrealists (whom she referred to as "microbes"), and all the others who dwelled upon bending and misshaping the human experience. Abbott wanted to record reality, and she wanted to do it in America.

Abbott moved back to New York only to find an array of obstacles facing her. Within months the stock market crashed, and soon thereafter economic depression set in. The reputation Abbott had enjoyed in Europe had not accompanied her across the Atlantic, so she was forced to support herself by seeking out business rather than waiting for it to come to her. In addition to the financial

³⁴Abbott, quoted in Russell, "A Still Life in Maine." 70.

³⁵Mitchell, Recollections, 13.

struggle, other problems plagued her, including "the prejudice against women in photography, the outright competitive hostility among many American photographers and the preoccupation with strictly commercial values, which were foreign to her."³⁶ She quickly learned, though, how to survive in New York -- she took on commercial work and "anything that came up."³⁷ Abbott's pictures appeared in popular magazines such as Vanity Fair and The Saturday Evening Post. She was hired by Fortune to make portraits of several business tycoons. While Margaret Bourke-White pictured the inner workings of industrial corporations, Abbott photographed the men behind it all, those in charge of the machine age. Although the Fortune assignments kept her working with portraiture, Abbott found her new sitters much more difficult to deal with than her Parisian friends. She recalled, "I couldn't bear it. Those chairmen of the board were so different from Europeans, so unrelaxed, so uncooperative, so 'just do your stuff and get out of here.'"³⁸ Yet Abbott chose not to measure New York by those men. To her, the city was defined by its places, not its people, as Paris had been. She understood, even liked, the difference, the "new urgency" so characteristically American. "There was poetry in our crazy gadgets, our

³⁶Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 14.

³⁷Mitchell, Recollections, 13.

³⁸Abbott, quoted in Russell, "A Still Life," 70.

tools, our architecture," she said.³⁹ Abbott planned to picture those facets that composed Americans' external world and helped them chart their progress.

New York City offered Abbott a study in contrasts. Through close observation, she saw "the past jostling the present."⁴⁰ She recognized that new skyscrapers were beginning to overshadow old brownstones and that modern technology was edging out traditional ways. Since the face of the city changed on a daily basis, Abbott wanted to preserve the pieces of New York's past that were slowly disappearing. "I wanted to record it before it changed completely...before the old buildings and historic spots were destroyed," she remembered.⁴¹ But she also hoped to capture on film the fleeting moments known as the present.

³⁹Abbott, quoted in O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 14.

⁴⁰Berenice Abbott, "Changing New York," in Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project, ed. Francis O'Connor (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), 158 [hereafter cited as "Changing New York" essay; and Emil Zubryn, "Saving New York for Posterity," Photography: A British Journal of Commercial, Advertising & Portrait Photography (January 1938): 12. Other references have misquoted Abbott's original plan to read "the present jostling the past." See, for example, Berman, "The Unflinching Eye," 92, and Merry A. Foresta, "Art and Document: Photography of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project," in Official Images: New Deal Photography (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 151.

⁴¹Smith College Museum of Art. "Berenice Abbott, Helen Frankenthaler, Tatyana Grosman, Louise Nevelson" exhibition catalogue. exhibition dates. 17 January through 24 February 1974.

Abbott believed that one of her primary responsibilities as a photographer included grasping the reality of the present. As she explained:

The present is the least understood thing about life. It's harder to gauge, to know fact from fiction, to know what's going on behind and in front of the scene. You can't tell from people as much as you can from things. You can see our villages and towns and they are really expressive of our real people.⁴²

A city in flux, New York provided a spectacular continuum for Abbott's work. She saw her pictures as connectors, bridges that linked her subjects simultaneously to the past and to the future. No doubt she realized that the tiny pieces of reality she was able to record became part of the past as soon as the shutter clicked, but she believed a photographer's duty was to recognize "the now."⁴³ Although this immediate transformation from present to past caused her mission to appear futile, Abbott remained encouraged, determined to show the city's vitality. A few years after she began photographing New York, she told a reporter why she considered cities important social indicators:

They have a personality. Not the people in them.

⁴²Meryle Secrest, "An Attic Studio Hides A Woman's Vision," The Washington Post (17 August 1969), sec. H, p. 2.

⁴³Berenice Abbott, The World of Atget (New York: Horizon Press, 1964), xxvi. In Recollections, Abbott concluded her essay, "Photography can only represent the present. Once photographed, the subject becomes part of the past." p. 13.

but the buildings. the little odd corners.... And New York, especially. It's so changing. It's in the making. We're making it. There's so much movement. It gets into your blood. You feel what the past left to you and you see what you are going to leave to the future.⁴⁴

The thrill of the city's possibilities led Abbott to explore its streets, to observe its statues, and to study its structures. Unfortunately, she came up against the city's inhabitants in her wanderings, so found the initial trek slightly uncomfortable.

In between magazine assignments and other commercial jobs, Abbott reserved one day a week for roaming about New York. She spent her Wednesdays alone with the city. She felt uneasy in her first trip out, intimidated by the curious and often unfriendly stares from passersby, but she knew she would have to overcome the barriers or abandon her project altogether. Beginning at the waterfront, Abbott worked her way up Manhattan isle, while "using a small camera as a sketch pad, noting interesting locations, storefronts, facades, and views."⁴⁵ When she ventured out with her larger 8" x 10" Century Universal, crowds gathered. Since her "camera was bulky and the tripod was poor," Abbott

⁴⁴Elliott Arnold, "The Way Berenice Abbott Feels About Cities and Photography, Her Exhibit Is Like an Artist Painting Portraits of His Beloved," New York World-Telegram, 21 October 1937.

⁴⁵Berenice Abbott, Berenice Abbott, with an essay by Julia Van Haften (New York: Aperture, 1988), 6.

had to spend time carefully setting up her shots.⁴⁶ Bowery residents scoffed at the young woman hiding under the black cloth, and more than a few others played practical jokes on her. She recalled:

Men used to make fun of me all the time. They couldn't understand what I was doing. The worst time I ever had was when I wanted to photograph the George Washington Bridge, which was just going up. I wanted to shoot it from up in the crane. The construction workers put me in the pan and, once I was high in the air, they swung the crane back and forth so I couldn't take any pictures. I was terrified.⁴⁷

Abbott realized she would have to contend with New Yorkers if she wanted to document their city. She resolved to continue the project that had become a personal obsession, even though no institution offered to support her work.

In 1931 Abbott applied for a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship but was rejected because her project failed to meet "international" character requirements. Her examination of American character generated little interest among the referees. Several months later she appealed to the Museum of the City of New York, which also turned down the pictorial survey. The next year Abbott crystallized her objectives in a proposal sent to the New York Historical Society. She stressed the importance of preserving the

⁴⁶Abbott, quoted in O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 167.

⁴⁷Berman, "The Unflinching Eye," 92; also, Arnold, "The Way Berenice Abbott Feels About Cities."

city's "unique personality" in a collection of documentary photographs.⁴⁸ Her eloquent statement included an argument supporting photography's role in historical preservation: "The camera alone can catch the swift surfaces of the cities today and speaks a language intelligible to all."⁴⁹ She felt particularly qualified to document the American city since she had spent nearly a decade in Europe and had gained some sense of perspective during those years. Convinced she had developed an unusual appreciation for her native country, Abbott wanted the privilege to interpret what she saw before other, perhaps less objective, photographers assumed the same task. She continued taking pictures of the city, though all of her appeals for institutional support were rejected.⁵⁰ One private museum patron sent Abbott the only contribution she received -- fifty dollars.⁵¹

⁴⁸Berenice Abbott, project proposal to New York Historical Society, excerpted in O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 16.

⁴⁹Ibid. O'Neal provides a detailed discussion of Abbott's various appeals for financial support in the early 1930s. He includes extensive excerpt from her proposal to the New York Historical Society.

⁵⁰Mitchell, Recollections, 13; also, Michael G. Sundell, "Berenice Abbott's Work in the 1930s," in Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies 5 (1980): 269-270, and O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 16-17. Sundell, through his extensive archival work in the Museum of the City of New York, determined that Abbott sent a form letter to two hundred of the museum's contributors but received no favorable response.

⁵¹Abbott, "Changing New York" essay, 158.

As national economic depression worsened in the 1930s, Abbott received even fewer opportunities for commercial business. She eventually resorted to other means of income and claimed to have sharpened her barbering skills. She would say to portrait sitters, "the pictures will be all wrong because of your hair," then she would pull out her scissors in order to make a little extra money.⁵² When architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock asked Abbott to collaborate with him on two photo projects, she accepted his offer. They gathered enough material to mount an exhibit at Wesleyan University entitled, "The Urban Vernacular of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s: American Cities Before the Civil War." At the Museum of Modern Art, they exhibited pictures of buildings designed by Boston architect H. H. Richardson.⁵³ The time Abbott spent working on Hitchcock's jobs prompted her to resume her New York documentation with a vengeance. Travels to several eastern seaboard cities had convinced her that America's premier city boasted an incomparable energy that could not be ignored. In Abbott's opinion, to abandon the project because it roused no support would have meant not only artistic failure but social irresponsibility on her part.

⁵²Abbott, quoted in Tom Zito, "Abbott: Glimpses of the Artiste," The Washington Post, 3 April 1976, sec. E.

⁵³Kramer, "Vanished City Life," 18.

She plunged forward, just as Atget had done, in spite of personal poverty.

The surface similarities between Abbott's New York and Atget's Paris led some of her contemporaries to argue that she was merely copying her mentor's work and possessed no creative impulses of her own.⁵⁴ She shared his values and his vision, and, as photographer Minor White pointed out, "a store front full of shoes, or a store window filled to the edges with hardware had a fascination that neither could resist...."⁵⁵ But Abbott saw what new, exciting possibilities the modern age offered a young nation, while Atget had viewed remnants of the past in an aged culture. He had taken a number of pictures solely for their value to artists who might find ornate door decorations or busy store fronts interesting subjects to paint -- thus the handmade sign on his studio door advertising. "Documents pour Artistes."⁵⁶ Atget laid the groundwork for other camera purists because he was a documentarian in the

⁵⁴Secrest, "An Attic Studio," H2. Abbott admits to the interviewer that her championing of Atget's pictures caused "an awful lot of harm.... They said I was imitating him. But my work isn't like his at all." See also, Zwingle, "A Life of Her Own," 64, and John Raeburn, "Culture Morphology and Cultural History in Berenice Abbott's Changing New York," Prospects: The Annual of American Cultural Studies 9 (1984): 255-292.

⁵⁵Minor White, "Eugene Atget," Journal of Photography and Motion Pictures of the George Eastman House 5 (April 1956): 80.

⁵⁶Abbott, "Atget" transcript, Landgren Papers.

strictest sense, but he had not harbored as intense a passion for Paris as Abbott felt for New York. Both selected reality as the primary content for their work, but they turned their heads in opposite directions. Atget stood in the present looking back to the past; Abbott stood in the present looking forward to the future. The Paris in his pictures is pastoral and unfettered; the New York in her pictures is alive and bustling. Art critic Elizabeth McCausland, who compared the two photographers, found "two worlds and two ages portrayed -- his the romantic last glow of nineteenth century nostalgia, hers the modern technological triumph of man over nature."⁵⁷ Photographer Lisette Model agreed, arguing that Abbott's pictures revealed some sense of the daily struggle people carried on to control the external, their immediate surroundings.⁵⁸ Even if they showed two very different worlds from opposing perspectives, Atget and Abbott did share a few basic artistic principles. Perhaps of most importance to Abbott was her recognition of the power a cumulative body of images could wield over a select few, perfect pictures. Her New

⁵⁷Elizabeth McCausland, "Berenice Abbott...Realist," Photo Arts 2 (Spring 1948), 50; also, Sundell, "Abbott's Work in the 1930s," 273; A. D. Coleman, "Latent Image: Further Thoughts on Berenice Abbott," The Village Voice, 28 January 1971, 18-19.

⁵⁸Model, quoted in McCausland, "Berenice Abbott...Realist," 47. In describing Abbott's photographs, Model said, "Everything is alive. Everything breathes. Everything is rooted in life."

York colleagues, the high-minded art photographers, created singular points of reference in their symbolic images, perpetuating what Abbott later called "the stale vogue of drowning in technique and ignoring content."⁵⁹ Conversely, Abbott took many shots in many places on many different occasions. She never believed that one great photograph could represent New York in all its complexity. For that reason, she continued her quest to document the whole city, just as Atget had done in Paris. The step-by-step building of Rockefeller center, the erection of the George Washington Bridge, the city glowing with electric lights -- all these and more went into Abbott's expanding collection depicting a thriving New York City. Eventually, the composite received notice. The power of Abbott's cumulative corpus of images caught someone's eye.

Curators at the Museum of the City of New York decided to exhibit forty-one of Abbott's city pictures in the fall of 1934. The show "proved of such great interest to the public" that the museum kept it on the walls for several months.⁶⁰ Elizabeth McCausland published a glowing review of the exhibit in a Springfield, Massachusetts, newspaper, then repeated her praises in the next issue of Trend

⁵⁹Berenice Abbott, "Photography at the Crossroads," in Universal Photo Almanac (New York: Falk Publishing Co., 1951), rep. in Photographers on Photography, ed. Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 20.

⁶⁰Abbott, "Changing New York" essay, 160.

magazine.⁶¹ The list of Abbott supporters continued to grow. The New School for Social Research offered her an instructorship in photography to begin the fall semester, 1935. Marchal Landgren, an official on the state's Municipal Art Committee, suggested that Abbott seek public funding for her "Changing New York" project. He had already made appeals to private citizens in Abbott's behalf but thought that one of the federal government New Deal programs might be willing to sponsor her work.⁶² Abbott prepared a new proposal describing the thrust of her documentary survey and submitted it to Audrey McMahon, the director in New York City for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project [FAP]. In the proposal she described the myriad facets that comprised "New York City in 1935." and, in summary, she asserted:

It is important that they should be photographed today, not tomorrow; for tomorrow may see many of these exciting and important mementos of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century New York swept away to make room for new colossi.... The tempo of the metropolis is not of eternity, or even time, but of the vanishing instant.⁶³

⁶¹Elizabeth McCausland, "The Photography of Berenice Abbott," *Trend* 3 (March/April 1935), 17.

⁶²Landgren to Ann Kelly, 27 June 1934, Landgren Papers. Landgren tried to interest the Rockefeller family in Abbott's documentation of the Radio City construction.

⁶³Berenice Abbott, FAP proposal, excerpted in O'Neal. Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 17.

Abbott laid out her objectives specifically, making clear that she alone intended to guide the project, rather than have government officials direct her hand or her camera. Even if she did need financial support, she did not intend to forfeit her artistic integrity at the hands of bureaucrats -- "I presented them with a complete plan of what I wanted to do. I also had five years' work to show them," she noted.⁶⁴ In September, after she had begun teaching at the New School, Abbott learned that Federal Art Project officials had accepted her proposal. They gave her a new title, Superintendent of the Photographic Division--FAP/New York City, and allowed her to continue building on the collection she had started six years before. Each new picture she took would be part of WPA/FAP project number 265-6900-826, more familiarly known as "Changing New York." The independent-minded photographer, who became employee number 233905, welcomed the federal government as benefactor.⁶⁵ Abbott and many others like her would discover that public patronage of art and artists greatly

⁶⁴Berman, "The Unflinching Eye." 92.

⁶⁵"Supervising Employees on Project Unit Payroll -- FAP (65-1699)," 1 August 1936, Records of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, Record Group 69, Series 651.315, Box 2115, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Abbott was classified as a project supervisor and received \$145.00 per month, as did all other project supervisors regardless of their assigned division (teaching, design, murals, etc.)

enhanced facets of American culture that had been previously neglected.

The Federal Art Project supported scores of struggling artists in the mid- to late 1930s. At the inception of the project, The New York Times announced, "U.S. to Find Work for 3500 Artists."⁶⁶ The FAP, along with the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Writers' Project, comprised the Four Arts program known as "Federal One." Sponsored by and supported with funds from the Works Progress Administration, the arts projects sought to provide steady, weekly work for unemployed, creative talents, some of whom were well-established before economic depression swept the United States. The WPA, established under President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 7034, removed Americans from relief rolls and placed them on employment payrolls of public or private work projects. The president's endeavors caused resumption of active, productive lives for hundreds of thousands of Americans. They picked up hammers, hoes, scripts, songbooks, pens, paintbrushes, chalks and cameras. They built highways and swimming pools, erected bridges and courthouses, cleaned streets, cleared lands, and painted post offices. Their efforts changed the face of America. What they could not clean or restore or erect fresh, they counted or recorded.

⁶⁶"U.S. to Find Work for 3500 Artists," The New York Times, 4 October 1935.

As a WPA photographer, Abbott captured on film merely a small portion of the country -- its largest city -- yet her work reflected and, at the same time, contributed to the growing national search for American identity. If the WPA accomplished important physical and structural changes, it also encouraged an internal, and more introspective, examination of national character. One FAP artist noted, "It has nourished my enthusiasm to know that I was contributing to the social order, that I was part of it."⁶⁷ Federal One artists felt motivated to carry out the tasks of isolating and scrutinizing regional characteristics that, when taken as a whole, would add to the understanding of the collective cultural pulse of the United States. One music critic noted that the Federal Music Project [FMP] orchestras showed "the promise of a new growth of art feeling in America -- local and vital."⁶⁸ FAP painters, muralists, sculptors, and photographers elicited similar responses after taking "living art into schools, hospitals and public buildings."⁶⁹ The sole guideline for their FAP work directed them to choose American subject matter,

⁶⁷"Portraits of the United States: The Art Project and the Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration." undated typewritten manuscript -- no. 13283. RG 69. Division of Information, Primary File, Box 77.

⁶⁸Unidentified critic, quoted in "Government Aid During the Depression to Professional, Technical and other Service Workers," WPA Publication 1936. RG 69. Series 0001. General Records, FAP.

⁶⁹Ibid.

whether "naturalistic, symbolic, legendary or historical."⁷⁰ By exploring what was essentially American and bringing it before the public in the form of art, FAP employees participated in a reciprocal agreement with the government. They could see their artistic visions realized, and even expect audiences to see their work, if they spoke merely from their own experiences as Americans. Project administrators would meet artists halfway by setting up exhibits in tax-supported public institutions, including "colleges, high schools, normal schools, trade schools, libraries, hospitals, museums, sanitoriums, prisons, and other Federal, State, and Municipal institutions and buildings."⁷¹ Places unable to afford works of art received FAP pieces to hang on their walls or display in other ways. The government sought not only to raise the level of appreciation for art in general, but at the same time, to celebrate American artists and American subjects.

WPA officials were sometimes forced to defend the work of Federal One employees to the more cautious elements within the American public. Some skeptics believed that those on the public payroll should carry only shovels or rakes. Aubrey Williams, a WPA administrator, said, "We don't think a good musician should be asked to turn second-

⁷⁰"Portraits of the U.S.," no. 13283, RG 69, Division of Information, Primary File.

⁷¹WPA/FAP, "Uniform Procedure for Allocation," RG 69, Series 0001, FAP General Records.

rate laborer in order that a sewer may be laid for relative permanency rather than a concert given for the momentary pleasure of our people."⁷² The WPA encouraged workers to continue using their own skills by giving them jobs in their chosen fields. For painters and sculptors the Federal Art Project resumed on a larger scale what the aborted Public Works of Art Project [PWAP] had abandoned in 1934 and what the Federal Emergency Relief Administration [FERA] could no longer afford.⁷³ The differences in the new program meant more funding, better administration, and employment of all kinds of artists, photographers included.⁷⁴ A New York Times article about the FAP pointed out in its subheading, "Nation-Wide Enterprise Is to Include Photographers as Well as Painters," and it emphasized the vital roles of these men and women hired to "record the progress of the various activities and compile a record of WPA projects."⁷⁵ A large

⁷²Milton Meltzer, Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 19.

⁷³Thomas E. Maulsby, "The Story of WPA in American Art," 1936, typewritten transcript, RG 69, Division of Information, Primary File. Maulsby was a research supervisor for the FAP.

⁷⁴Foresta, "Art and Document," in Official Images, 148-156. Foresta briefly discusses PWAP as a precursor to the FAP, and she mentions both the criticism and support directed at the two programs.

⁷⁵"U.S. to Find Work for 3500 Artists," 4 October 1935: also, Audrey McMahon to Bruce McClure, 25 June 1935. RG 69. Series 651.315. McMahon informs McClure (of the FERA) that 100 new employees may be added to the current payroll -- she specifically mentions hiring photographers.

number of FAP photographers, particularly those categorized in "Part 11, Publicity and Research," countered the cries of "boondoggling" by providing pictures of artists and other WPA employees at work. Well over half of the New York City photographic staff devoted its time to recording citywide WPA activities.⁷⁶ In one of her first items of correspondence to FAP national director Holger Cahill, Audrey McMahon explained that the New York photography project was "primarily a service project and only secondarily a creative one."⁷⁷ In the first few months, FAP photographers snapped so many pictures of various WPA projects that Cahill was forced to limit the excessive documentation. He informed McMahon to carefully check all photography assignments and to make sure that her photographers did not step outside the FAP's jurisdiction.⁷⁸ Although he wanted sufficient evidence to prove the project's worth, Cahill also recognized the importance of

⁷⁶See copies of the "WPA Monthly Statistical Bulletin" from 1936 to 1940, RG 69, Division of Information, Primary File, and copies of "New York City Monthly Report," 1936 to 1940, RG 69, Series 0004. Also, RG 69--ANP and RG 69--AN, Still Pictures Branch, National Archives. The FAP photographs housed here bear this out. An overwhelming majority show works (buildings, murals, paintings, art classes) in progress.

⁷⁷McMahon to Cahill, 26 September 1935, RG 69, Series 0005.

⁷⁸Cahill to McMahon, 17 January 1936, RG 69, Series 211.5, Box 443. Reiterating that the FAP's major concern was its "artists," Cahill explained that the high costs of producing unnecessary photographs might hinder the FAP's ability to take care of its creative talents.

fostering artistic excellence in visual expression. In the long run, quality work would convince the American public of Federal One's worth.

Cahill operated under the influence of John Dewey's aesthetic philosophy, which pointed up the importance of a person's (particularly an artist's) experience with the immediate environment.⁷⁹ Cahill emphasized this relationship as a measure of the national cultural awareness:

The finest way of knowing our own country is to consult its works of art.... In these works we participate fully in the rich spiritual life of our country. In our own day it is the works of artists in all fields which concentrates [sic] and reveals [sic] contemporary American experience in its fullness. It is works of art which reveal us to ourselves. For these reasons I consider the Government art projects of the greatest importance.⁸⁰

In the FAP reference material on procedure, suggestions were made to photographers "to work on research projects and on other projects of value to the community."⁸¹ No more appropriate artist than Berenice Abbott could have been

⁷⁹See Foresta's discussion of Dewey's impact on Cahill in "Art and Document," 150.

⁸⁰Holger Cahill, Speech delivered the meeting of Regional Supervisors, Women's Division -- WPA, 2 July 1936, transcript, RG 69, Division of Information, Primary File, Box 77.

⁸¹Holger Cahill, FAP Director. "Federal Art Project Manual," October 1935, RG 69, Series 0001, FAP. General Records.

selected to create a documentary record of New York City. Even if she had been unaware of the FAP's stipulations about "American" subject matter, her pictures would have met federal government requirements. For she was not attempting to paint a glowing picture of the metropolis, nor to provide a nostalgic walk down memory lane. Rather, she was trying to capture all the elements that comprised a burgeoning city characterized most distinctly by its heterogeneity. Within the larger context of FAP objectives, her work fit in -- it was largely dictated by her own fascination with the city and guided by her experiences there. Abbott's photographs celebrated what one observer has called "the aleatoric quality of American culture."⁸² It was exactly what the FAP hoped to reveal.

"Changing New York," as one of the FAP Photography Division's "creative" projects, stood apart from the service assignments. Since Abbott served as its director, photographer, consultant, and printer, she enjoyed a great deal of freedom on the job. Although other creative projects were listed, Abbott's work was usually treated separately, as a unique undertaking.⁸³ Photography division

⁸²John Raeburn, "'Culture Morphology' and Cultural History in Berenice Abbott's Changing New York," Prospects: The Annual of American Cultural Studies 9 (1984): 258.

⁸³"Art Work in Non-Federal Buildings (65-21-3755) and the Federal Art Project (65-1699) of the City of New York under the United States Works Progress Administration," Supplement A (December 1935) and Supplement C (January 1936), RG 69, Series 651.315, Box 2114. In these two

supervisor Noel Vincentini made the distinction soon after Abbott's arrival at FAP. In his November 1935 report, Vincentini briefly described the activities of the general photography project:

The work of Photography, Part 6, consists of the taking of photographs requested for their records and official work by the various W.P.A. projects in the metropolitan area.

In addition to this work, the Photography section is carrying out a creative project called, "Changing New York." On this project, photographs are being taken of buildings, locales and street scenes, which are meant to serve as a permanent graphic record of the transformations of the city and the changes in the habits of its life.⁸⁴

Abbott's pictures gained immediate recognition. Within six months of her initiation with the FAP, she had photographs on exhibit at the WPA Gallery on East 39th Street. The New York Herald Tribune interviewed her, providing her a forum in which to tell the city's residents why she felt the "Changing New York" project should be important to them. Abbott's explanation echoed the numerous appeals for support she had made in the early 1930s:

New York is a spectacular city full of contrasts.

reports, statistics for the photo projects have been compiled, but "Changing New York" is considered individually.

84"Art Work in Non-Federal Buildings (65-21-3755) and The Federal Art Project (65-1699) of the City of New York under the United States Works Progress Administration: A Descriptive Guide." November 1935, RG69. Series 651.315. Box 2114.

The city is changing all the time.... Once, way up at the end of Broadway, I saw a little church next to a row of new apartment houses. I went back the next week to take it, and the church was gone.⁸⁵

Abbott reiterated her interest in "the external influences" within the city and pointed out, "Front and Pearl Streets are very Dutch, and Cherry Street is pure English.... And from all this melange comes something that is uniquely New York."⁸⁶ The city's devoted documentarian saw her reputation in the American art world begin to grow as a result of her work with the FAP.

Requests for Abbott's pictures and negatives and prints poured into administrators' offices. As co-sponsor of the FAP project, "Changing New York," the Museum of the City of New York wanted to retain Abbott's negatives. Hardinge Scholle, the director of the museum, went directly over local heads to the FAP's Washington headquarters in an effort to obtain the project negatives for future print requests. Holger Cahill explained to Scholle, "Artists like Miss Berenice Abbott are very reluctant to have anyone else do their printing," but he reassured the director that the museum would eventually receive all of the negatives for

⁸⁵"Changing City Caught In Flight by Photographs," New York Herald Tribune, 19 March 1936.

⁸⁶Ibid.

permanent keeping.⁸⁷ The Grand Central Palace displayed several of Abbott's photographs in a May, 1936, show entitled, "Women's Exhibition of Arts and Industries."⁸⁸ The following month, twenty "Changing New York" project pictures were selected for inclusion in a travelling exhibit known as the "Washington Circuit." For the circuit (project no. 8) the national offices chose outstanding examples of project art and sent them to federal galleries throughout the country, particularly those located in the southern states. Nearly all were mixed media exhibits that included paintings, prints, pictures, designs, and sculpture, but two travelling shows were devoted exclusively to photography -- one to pictures taken for the Federal Writers' Project's Washington, D.C. City Guide Book, and the other to Abbott's images of "Changing New York."⁸⁹ Unfortunately, the popularity Abbott enjoyed was accompanied by controversy. When the Museum of Modern Art [MOMA] decided to put an FAP show on its walls, the museum's public relations director demanded to handle all publicity for the exhibit. Within a few weeks The New York Times, seemingly unaware of the upcoming MOMA exhibit, offered to present an Abbott

⁸⁷Correspondence between Hardinge Scholle and Holger Cahill, February 1936, RG 69, Series 0005, Box 28.

⁸⁸FAP/NYC Exhibition Department, Weekly Report, 20 May 1936, RG 69, Series 0004, Box 20.

⁸⁹FAP/NYC, Exhibition Department, Weekly Reports for months June to December, 1936, RG 69, Series 0004. See especially, 27 August 1936 report.

photograph layout in its Sunday rotogravure section. Officials at MOMA threatened to cancel the exhibit, while national FAP administrators threatened to dismiss any employees who released information regarding the forthcoming show. Abbott, although one of the more prominent artists on MOMA's agenda, let FAP administrators handle the whole unpleasant affair.⁹⁰ Her principal interest remained the same -- to take pictures of New York, not to get mixed up in its highly volatile art community.

Due to the increasing demand for her photographs by mid-1936, Abbott spent an extremely busy year taking new pictures and making prints. She completed extensive studies of the Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan Bridge, Union Square, and Pennsylvania Station. She focussed on construction work all over the city, but those that held special interest for her were the magnificent skyscrapers that dwarfed older, adjacent buildings. Fortunately, the FAP had allocated money for Abbott to have a driver, two technical assistants, and two researchers on the "Changing New York" project. The help was there if she needed it, but she personally assumed most of the responsibilities -- Abbott chose her own subjects, she fussed over her negatives, and she preferred

⁹⁰Sarah Newmeyer to Holger Cahill, 12 June 1936; Elizabeth McCausland to T. E. Mulsby, 27 August 1936, RG 69, S 0001; Thomas Parker to Audrey McMahon, 13 August 1936; Thomas Parker to Audrey McMahon, 21 August 1936; McNulty to Audrey McMahon, 25 August 1936; T. E. Mulsby to Thomas Parker, [August 1936], RG 69, S 0005.

to make all the necessary prints.⁹¹ Government sponsorship had neither diluted her fierce independence nor redirected her personal goals. In early 1937, the Museum of the City of New York expressed an interest in showing off the project it had co-sponsored. The museum directors wanted to present a comprehensive exhibit composed entirely of Abbott's "Changing New York" pictures.⁹² When the show opened in October, 110 of Abbott's 260 project photographs revealed the multi-faceted exterior of New York City to its residents. Public response was overwhelming; the museum reported increased general attendance, especially during the Christmas holidays when college students "flocked to the exhibition."⁹³ Museum officials were forced to put off the exhibit's closing date in order to accommodate all of the curious patrons. Without doubt, "Changing New York" had accomplished several of the FAP's major goals, not the least of which involved generating Americans' interest in art created by their own, rather than European, artists.⁹⁴

⁹¹Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 18.

⁹²Audrey McMahon to Mildred Holzhauer, 8 March 1937, RG 69, S 651.315, Box 2116; Exhibition Project, Weekly Reports, 8 March 1937 and 5 April 1937, RG 69, S 0004.

⁹³Department of Information, Special Release, 31 December 1937; "WPA Federal Art Project Exhibitions in Full Swing," 15 October 1937, RG 69, S 002-A; Exhibition Project, Weekly Report, 25 October 1937, RG 69, S 0004.

⁹⁴See, for example, "Notes on the Exhibition Program," n.d., RG 69, S 0001; and, Holger Cahill to Edward Steichen, 4 April 1936, RG 69, S 651.315, Box 2114. Cahill suggests to Steichen, a noted photographer, that many developments

Abbott broke new ground with her "Changing New York" exhibits. Photography-only shows were rare since the value of the medium had not yet gained full recognition from other visual artists. Photography critic Beaumont Newhall, who served as an administrator on the Massachusetts FERA art project, pointed out that holding a photography exhibit in 1937, particularly at a New York museum, was a risky and controversial business practice. He explained that some critics abhorred the idea of pictures being shown on the same walls that had previously held great paintings.⁹⁵ If any photographer could expect to be accepted among artists or even art photographers, it certainly was not Abbott, who told a newspaper reporter, "Next to golf and bridge, I loathe people who try to make photographs look like paintings or engravings."⁹⁶ Having stayed away from arty photographers, Abbott aligned herself with very few others in her field. Perhaps she found more in common with her audience members than with colleagues, since the former looked at her pictures with enthusiasm similar to that she felt when photographing the scenes. The reputation Abbott

within the FAP "may furnish the basis for a new and more vital American art."

⁹⁵Beaumont Newhall, interview by Joseph Trovato, 23 January 1965, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁶"Woman with Camera Snaps Revealing History of New York Life in Its Homeliest of Garb," New York World-Telegram, 11 November 1938.

built from the popularity of "Changing New York" helped to open up other avenues for her photographic pursuits. The FAP administrators in Washington looked on with scrutinizing eyes, while Abbott received countless compliments, inviting offers, and numerous requests for pictures. Although they appreciated the tremendous attention given to an FAP project, government officials grew somewhat uneasy with Abbott's personal success. They flexed their bureaucratic muscles in order to keep her independence in check.

Working through the channels of bureaucracy grew even more tiresome as the Washington FAP office insisted more emphatically on approving material released for publication. The policy, which had been in place since the inception of the WPA, hampered the New York City office because it handled such a large volume of magazine, newspaper, and book requests. The New York City division of the FAP appeared to federal administrators a bit cavalier in its approach toward publishable material. Constant reminders about necessary federal "clearance and approval" landed on Audrey McMahon's desk. Thomas Parker, Holger Cahill's assistant, addressed the subject on numerous occasions. He usually reiterated the FAP's responsibility to its public:

I think it would be well for the information service to remember in the preparation of such articles that they are the employees of the Federal Government, and that the public who

read the articles are the tax-payers who are providing the money for their employment.⁹⁷

Ellen Woodward, another assistant in the Washington office, supported Parker's criticism of the New York City project and suggested that "material which goes to a nation-wide audience must be approved from the standpoint of the national program."⁹⁸ The success of the New York City FAP, and particularly Abbott's contribution to it, no doubt prompted the national office to pay closer attention. One official from the Information Section made a special trip to New York to meet with Abbott about several photographs that might have publication potential.⁹⁹ In the summer of 1938, Parker caused an uproar by asking Abbott to send her negatives to the Washington office. Without hesitation, McMahon replied, "Miss Abbott does not wish her negatives to be sent out and it is not procedural with us to act against the wishes of the artist."¹⁰⁰ Although she was on the government payroll, Abbott enjoyed a great deal more freedom

⁹⁷Parker to McMahon, 15 September 1937, RG 69, S 211.5, Box 443.

⁹⁸Woodward to Paul Edwards, 13 May 1938, RG 69, S 651.315, Box 2117.

⁹⁹Thomas Parker to Audrey McMahon, 18 April 1938: Parker to McMahon, 12 May 1938, RG 69 S 651.315, Box 2117.

¹⁰⁰McMahon to Parker, 23 September 1938: For more on the heated controversy, see correspondence between McMahon and Parker, 13 September to 12 October 1938. RG 69, S 211.5, Box 444. Also, Abbott to Parker, 11 October 1938. RG 69, S 651.315, Box 2118.

than other FAP artists and other government photographers. At the same time Abbott was winning battles with Washington bureaucrats, Dorothea Lange was fighting to maintain some sense of artistic independence. While Abbott got to develop her own negatives and toss out the ones she disliked, Lange and her FSA colleagues had to send all of their undeveloped rolls of film to Washington to be printed. But Abbott's freedom was short-lived. In 1938, when E. P. Dutton offered to publish Changing New York, FAP officials assumed all control, refusing Abbott permission to select the photographs or to make suggestions regarding the book's design.¹⁰¹ Several months later, when the FAP discontinued the "Changing New York" project, Abbott resigned.¹⁰² She made a timely decision as Federal One soon came under close scrutiny from many sides.

Throughout the year, general criticism of Roosevelt's New Deal programs had grown more severe. The changing attitudes reflected Congressional sentiments in the aftermath of the President's infamous "court-packing" attempt. Roosevelt had lost precious support after launching an offensive before Congressional elections to reward his loyal court-plan supporters and to eliminate the disloyal elements. In a political sense, the New Dealers

¹⁰¹Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 18.

¹⁰²Coincidentally, Abbott left the FAP around the same time Lange left the FSA.

suffered "a discouraging year" in 1938.¹⁰³ One of the programs most closely examined was the WPA, particularly the Federal One branch. Fear that radicals might infiltrate the Four Arts projects led Congress to cut WPA funding. In addition, all project workers who had been on the payroll for eighteen months or longer were released. New relief workers were forced to take a "loyalty oath" and the FAP, FWP, and FMP could continue only under the direction of local sponsors who closely supervised each project. The Federal Theatre Project, which had been perceived as the most radical of the Four Arts programs, was abolished.¹⁰⁴ Fortunately, Abbott had come in as a government employee when the New Deal programs, Federal One in particular, enjoyed widespread support, before they were transformed by politicians. To have carried on her work under editorial eyes would have gone against Abbott's spirit as a documentarian, one that led her to record, without flourish or embellishment, what simply existed. Federal patronage had been good for her but only up to a point -- when it began to dictate individual interpretation, the most talented artists, Abbott among them, chose to leave rather than to compromise.

¹⁰³William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 266.

¹⁰⁴Meltzer, Violins and Shovels, 140.

Beaumont Newhall called the "Changing New York" project "the greatest example of photography in the WPA."¹⁰⁵ Abbott biographer Hank O'Neal pointed out that it "showed what can be accomplished when the U.S. Government aids artists and has the good sense to leave them alone."¹⁰⁶ Considered as a whole body, a cumulative set not to be divided, "Changing New York" achieved what Abbott hoped it would achieve. Later in her career, she wrote:

Photography does not stand by itself in a vacuum; it is linked on the one side to manufacturers of materials and on the other side to the distributors of the product, that is, to publishers, editors, business leaders, museum directors, and to the public.¹⁰⁷

"Changing New York" was an appropriate product of the 1930s. The project celebrated what was American, yet what was regional; what was modern, yet what was staid; where Americans had been, and also where they were going. The photographs commanded viewers to place themselves in the scenes, to examine the buildings, the doorways, the architecture, and the statuary, and to act as if they were standing in the picture, personally judging the interplay between past and present and past again. Abbott's pictures

¹⁰⁵Newhall-Trovato interview, 12.

¹⁰⁶O'Neal, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, 19.

¹⁰⁷Berenice Abbott, "It Has To Walk Alone," Infinity 7 (1951), 6-7, rep. in Photographers on Photography, ed. Nathan Lyons, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966): 17.

asked onlookers to gauge the weight of history in relation to the fleeting present, the "vanishing instant." Abbott knew that the moment her shutter clicked a piece of the present became the past, yet she continued to study reality with the hope that others could participate in a particular moment just as she had.¹⁰⁸ By recognizing the power that exterior forces wielded over internal lives, Abbott led viewers to evaluate their own places within the environment. She argued that photography should be "connected with the world we live in," and challenged photographers to guide their senses:

The eye is no better than the philosophy behind it. The photographer creates, evolves a better, more selective, more acute seeing eye by looking ever more sharply at what is going on in the world.¹⁰⁹

By surveying New York in the 1930s, Abbott experienced firsthand the transitory nature of an American city. By photographing it, she fit a few brief moments of reality into the larger scheme of the past, present, and future -- the whole gamut of human experience.

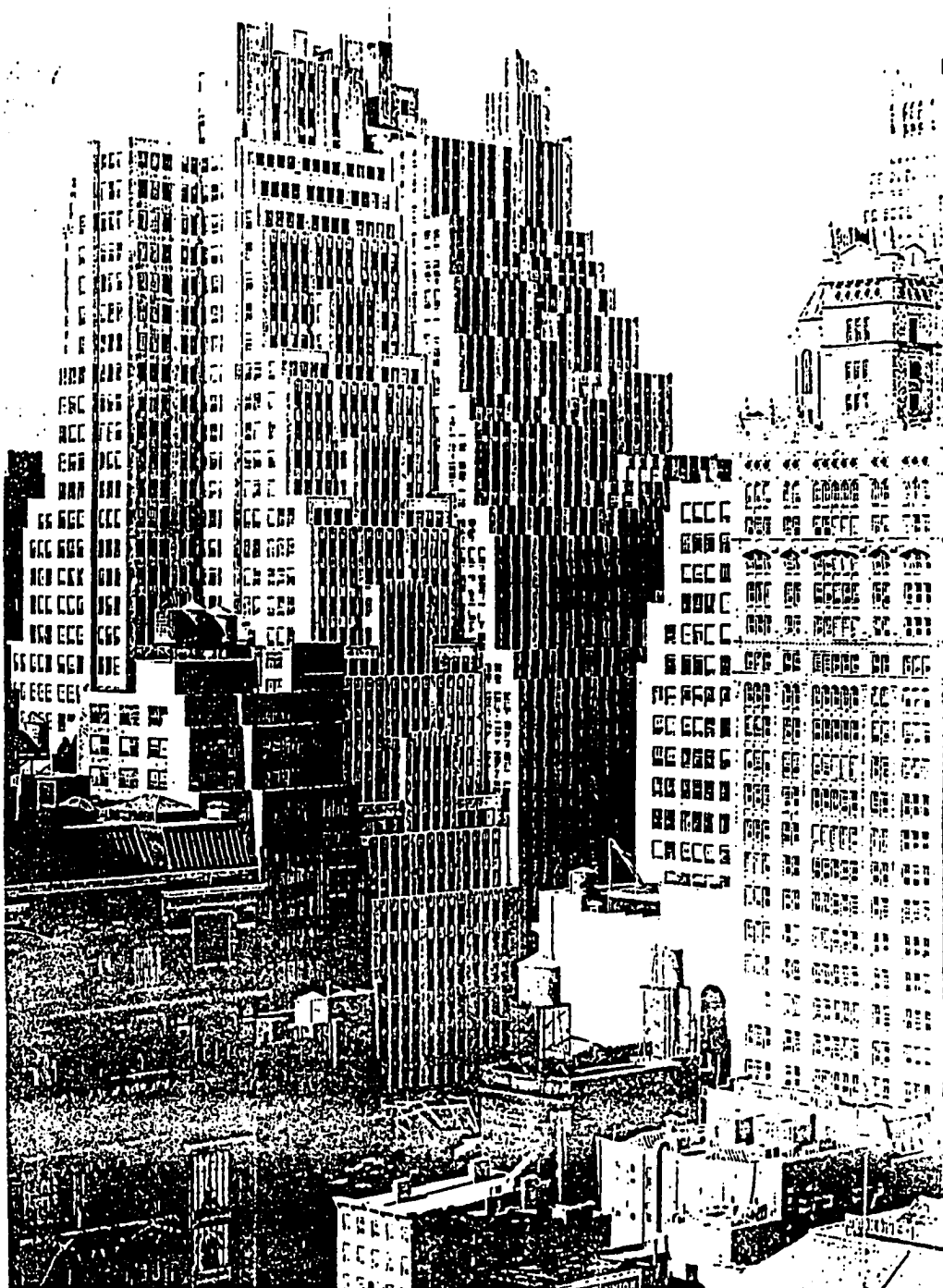
¹⁰⁸John Raeburn, "'Culture Morphology' and Cultural History," 261-62. Raeburn compares Abbott's work to Faulkner's Light in August (1932) and Absalom! Absalom! (1936), suggesting that both the photographer and the novelist require their audience members to participate rather than merely observe. Cf. Newhall-Trovato interview, in which Newhall discusses photography itself as an act of participation.

¹⁰⁹Abbott, "Photography at the Crossroads," 21.

AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS



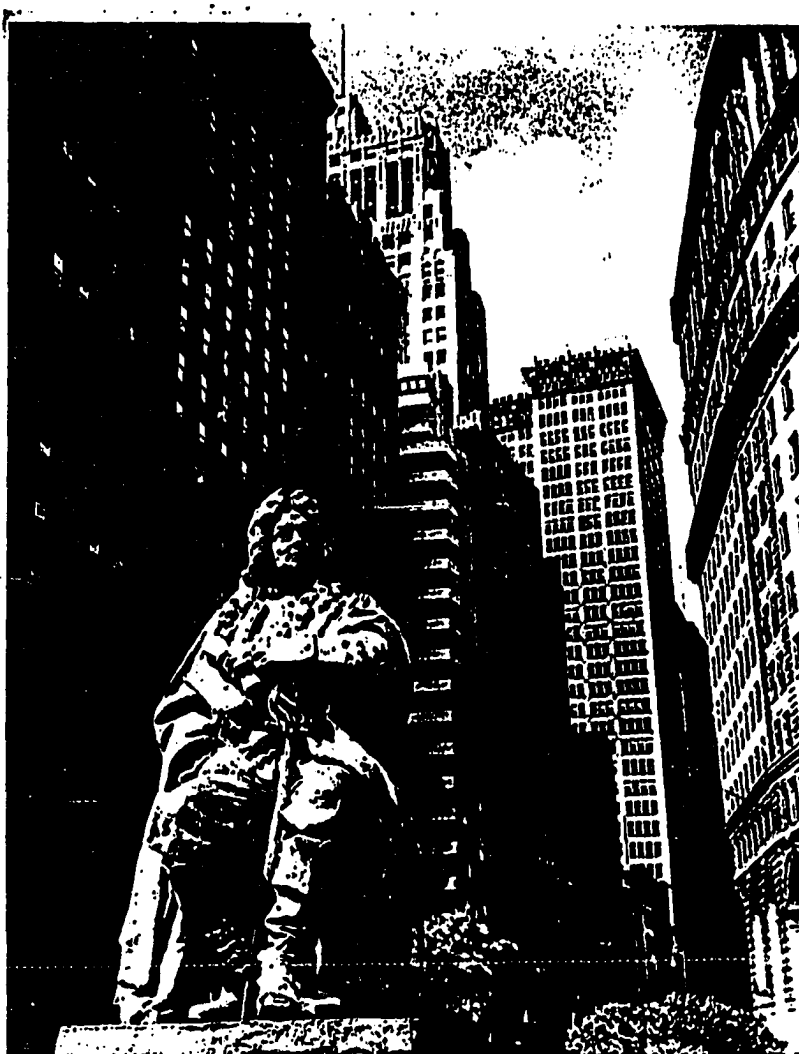
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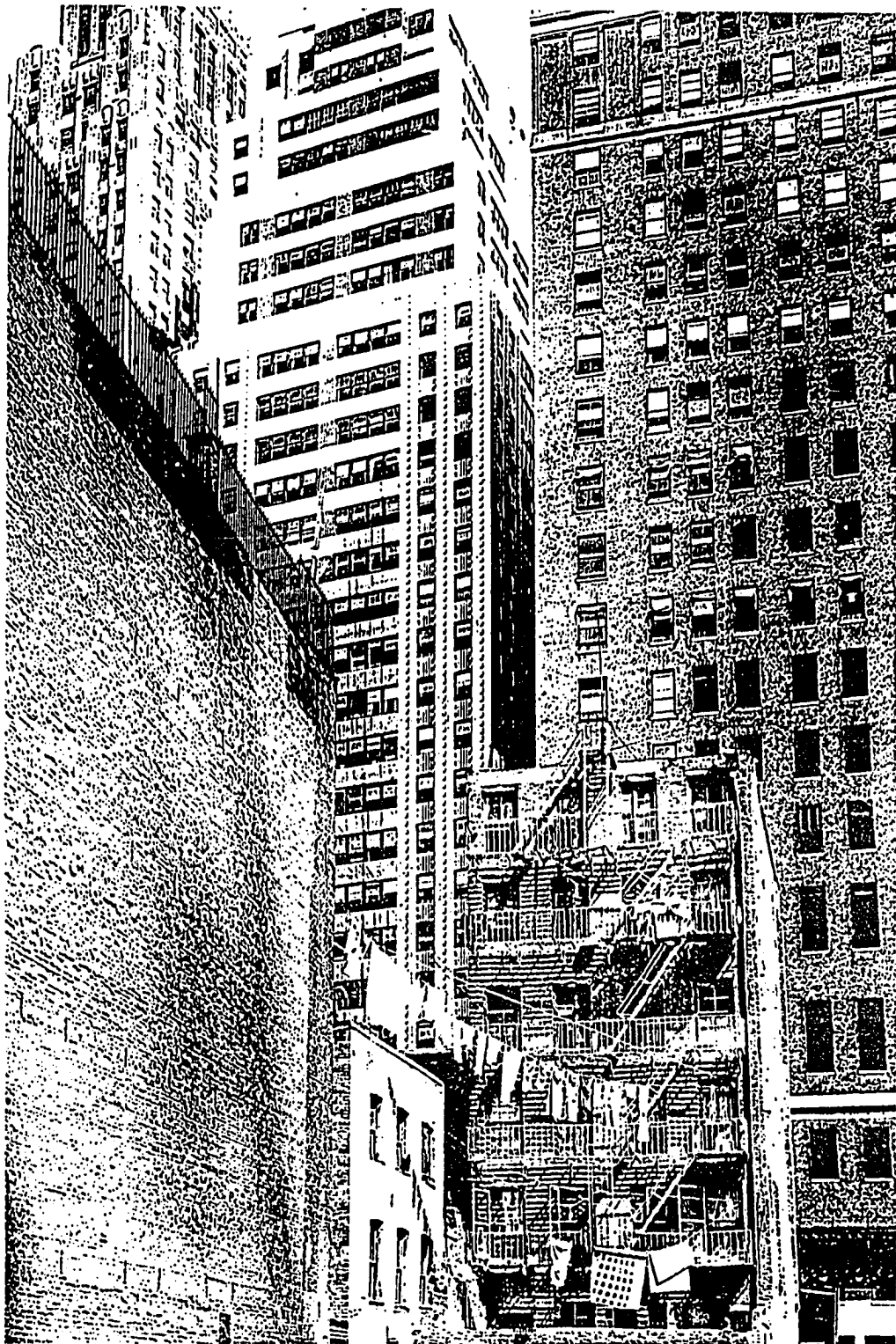
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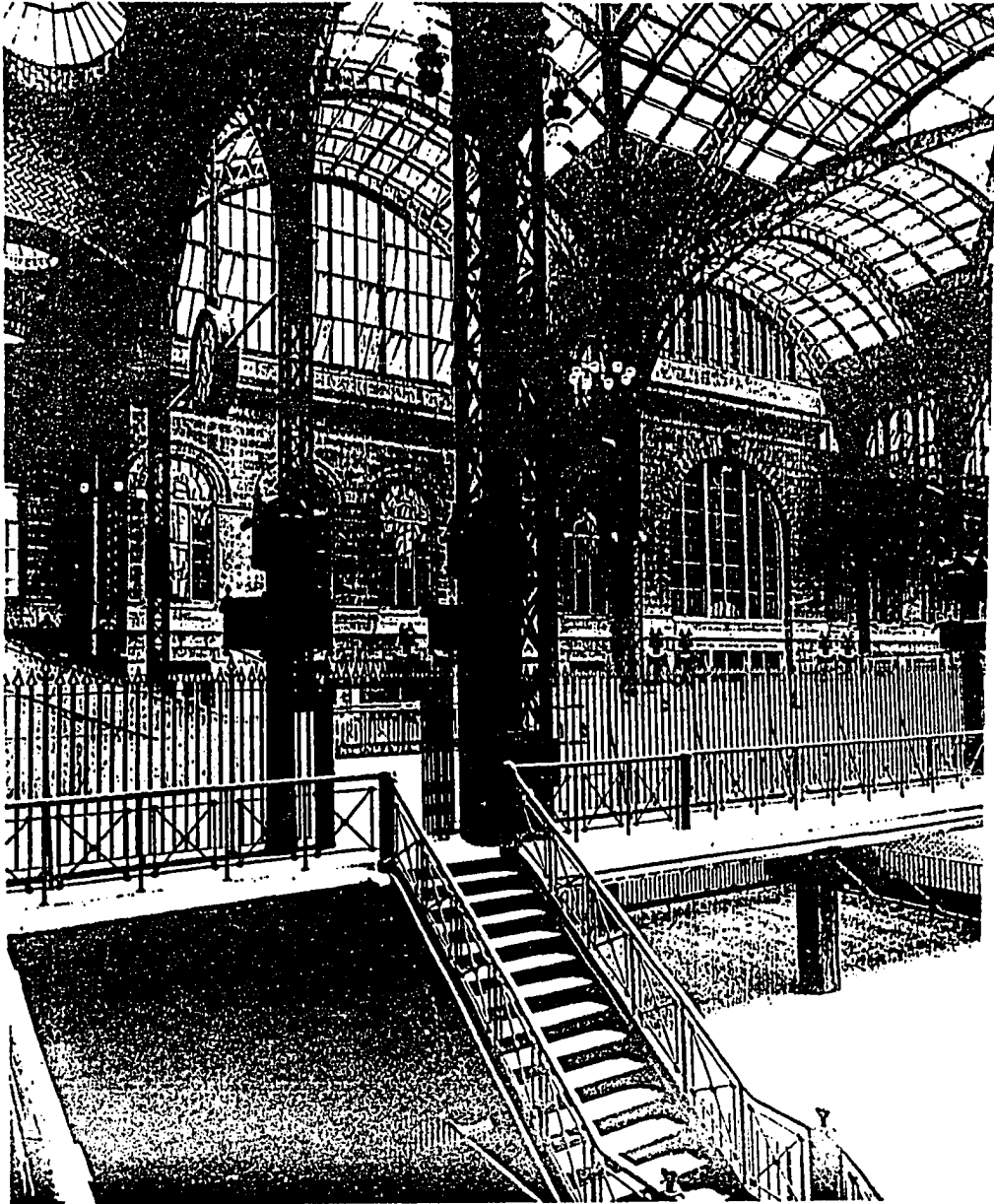
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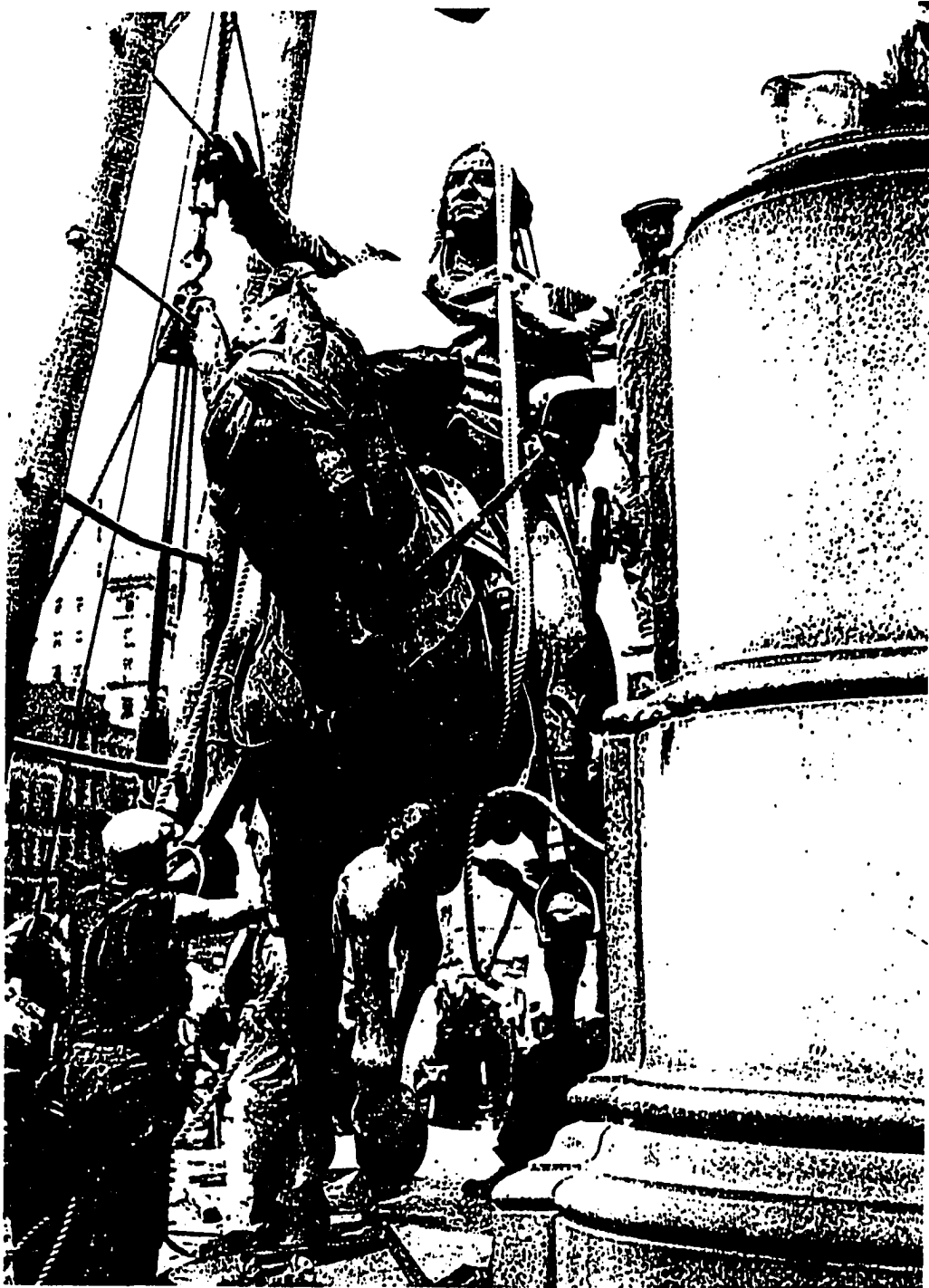
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TO GIVE "THE PEOPLE" THEIR DUE:
STRIKING A BALANCE

When I moved to Washington to begin the FSA job, I brought with me, not only bags and baggage, but also a significant measure of experience.... I had warm feelings for blacks, could communicate effectively with children, had deep sympathy for the underprivileged, resented evidence of conspicuous consumption, [and] felt the need to contribute to a more equitable society.

Marion Post Wolcott. 1986

At age seventy-six, Marion Post Wolcott gave the keynote address at a conference on "Women in Photography: Making Connections." An audience composed largely of photographers and photography scholars listened as Wolcott concluded her talk with frank and poignant advice. "Speak with your images from your heart and soul. Give of yourselves. Trust your gut reactions; Suck out the juices - the essence of your life experiences. Get on with it: it may not be too late."¹ Wolcott directed her words toward those who were devoting their lives to the visual image and its creation, its interpretation, or its impact on the surrounding world. Wolcott's speech sounded much like the tone of the letters she had written nearly fifty years earlier as a young photographer for the federal government.

¹Marion Post Wolcott, speech text, "Women in Photography" conference, Syracuse University, October 10-12, 1986. Thanks to Amy Doherty, conference director and George Arents Research Library archivist, for her personal copy of the speech notes.

Her penchant for recognizing needs and correcting inequities in society had made Wolcott a vital member of a New Deal team in the 1930s. She held onto the same philosophy for decades, and she explained to the conference group that the most important quality a documentary photographer could possess was the ability "to empathize with the people directly and indirectly involved."² Wolcott strove to understand her subjects and their lives. She believed her efforts would not go unrecognized, because the photographs revealed her dedication to honest, unfettered depictions of reality. Her opinions had been formed early on, the results of childhood and teenage years spent in a maturing America and young adult days spent in a rapidly-changing Europe. These offered bases not only for her political and social opinions but also for her keenly-defined artistic temperament.

Marion Post was born in Montclair, New Jersey, in the summer of 1910. Montclair, located just eight miles northwest of the county seat Newark, sat just outside the concentrated industrial area of the state. A mere fifteen-minute ride on the eastbound commuter train would take one to bustling New York City. Situated two hundred miles from Boston to the north and ninety miles from Philadelphia across the Delaware River, Post's hometown was located in the center of the most heavily-populated, urban-industrial

²Ibid.

region in America. Post was exposed at an early age to the impending problems threatening American society. She attributed much of her awareness to her mother, Marion Post. Sr. The elder Post, a social worker, expressed politically- and socially-liberal opinions that caused the neighbors (and eventually, her own husband) to consider her too eccentric and too radical. Walter Post, a practitioner of holistic medicine, divorced his wife when their daughter Marion was thirteen years old. Older sister Helen, the "overachiever" of the two Post girls, aligned with her father, while Marion chose to spend more time with her mother. Marion watched the unstable marriage dissolve and become even more scandalous when her mother refused the customary financial assistance from her former husband. The staunch independence Marion's mother displayed made a lasting impression on the adolescent.³

Post remained close to her mother, who took a job with Margaret Sanger at the Birth Control Research Bureau in New York City. Sanger, who fought hard to eliminate the social stigma and oppression that accompanied unwanted pregnancy, organized birth control clinics all over the country.⁴ The

³Ibid.; also, Beverly W. Brannan, keynote address, "Woman: A Different Voice" Conference, 26-28 September 1990, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky; F. Jack Hurley, Marion Post Wolcott: A Photographic Journey (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 3-7.

⁴David M. Kennedy, Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970).

elder Marion Post took pride in working with Sanger, particularly as they guided the New York clinic through the growing pains of its early years.⁵ Sanger was so impressed with Post's work that she asked her to travel nationwide to set up new clinics. Marion remembered:

Mother became a field worker and a pioneer, traveling alone in her car around the country to rural and urban areas, first doing the ground work (obtaining support of the clergy and local influential citizens) for the establishment of birth control clinics -- for her a crusade. Then after the Sanger Research Bureau and American Birth Control League merged... my mother became their spokeswoman. I admired her not because she was my mother, but for her courage, dedication, strength and compassion.⁶

During the time the elder Post worked with Sanger, she espoused the attitudes labelled "revolutionary" by conservatives in America, who saw in them a threat to family living and American respectability. The ideas preached by outspoken reformers, such as "free motherhood" advocate Emma Goldman and labor organizer Big Bill Haywood, were considered radical answers to society's perplexing questions. Mrs. Post clung tenaciously to these views, ones which had prompted Sanger to address the birth control

⁵Julie Boddy, "Photographing Women: The Farm Security Administration Work of Marion Post Wolcott," in Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940, ed. Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 155.

⁶Wolcott, "Women in Photography" speech.

problems of working-class women.⁷ Post absorbed the passion radiated by her mother, who encouraged physical and sexual self-expression and who demonstrated the strength and dignity one gained in being self-supporting. As a teenager, Marion chose her own means of self-expression -- dance -- which she aspired to mold into a professional career.

Before Post began serious dance study, she completed a twelve-year preparatory education. Attending New Jersey public schools until age fourteen, she then moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, to finish her high school education at Edgewood, a private boarding institution. In 1928 Post enrolled in the New School for Social Research, a training ground that inspired and encouraged liberal thought among its artists, educators, and intellectuals.⁸ The New School, sensitive to the avant-garde, sponsored modern dance teachers as lecturers. By this time Post had devoted much of her time to studying dance with Ruth St. Denis, a pioneer of modern movement. The lessons Marion learned from St. Denis at the Denishawn School of Dance often echoed her mother's emphasis on maintaining and projecting a positive sense of self. Affectionately deemed "Miss Ruth" by her students, St. Denis viewed dancing as "an elixir for the

⁷Kennedy, Birth Control, 19-23.

⁸Marion Post Wolcott File, Roy Emerson Stryker Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Louisville, Kentucky [hereafter cited as Stryker Collection].

attainment of health and beauty."⁹ St. Denis's style brought dance down from the high culture pedestal it had long occupied, allowing a wider audience to appreciate the spectacles she presented. The St. Denis artistic style paralleled Post's own developing ideas about the connections shared by culture, experience, art, and education.¹⁰

Post's studies with the innovative Ruth St. Denis never reached the serious level of dedication she maintained for the second of her instructors, Doris Humphrey. Humphrey, a longtime student of St. Denis and Ted Shawn, was one of the Denishawn School's earliest graduates. From the same group of modern dancers at Denishawn came Humphrey's classmate Martha Graham, later an outstanding choreographer of American dance. Though Humphrey and her teacher, St. Denis, agreed on the same goals for dance as an art form, they disagreed on the ways to achieve those objectives. Humphrey broke away from the Denishawn method, opened her own studio and developed a unique style, one that impressed Post to the

⁹Joseph H. Mazo, Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1977), 61.

¹⁰Beverly W. Brannan, telephone conversation with author, 19 March 1990. Brannan emphasized Post's leftist leanings in connection with her study at the New School and her interest in John Dewey's ideology.

extent that she abandoned her studies at New York University in order to study dance full time.¹¹

Post learned from Humphrey that the ultimate achievement in dance was balance. Rigorous drills, guided by a very strict instructor, produced some frightening moments between falling and recovering. Humphrey's entire theory of dance rested on sustaining bodily movement as it reached the point where equilibrium met loss of control. Post recognized her mentor's reliance on individual creativity as it existed within this formal dance structure. Though she controlled her own emotions with her intellect, Humphrey believed emotion must guide one's life and impressed this idea upon her students. Her convictions led her to design many important dances concerned with social commentary.¹² Post's perception of the delicate balance necessary to satisfy Humphrey's demands proved to be a valuable asset, one she later would use frequently in her photographic work. Her artistic sense was further developed by Humphrey's insistence upon the precise marking of space and time on the stage. Had the instructor's stage been framed, an onlooker could easily understand why each dancer,

¹¹Boddy, "Photographing Women," 156. Post had decided just months before to pursue an education degree at NYU. For a discussion of the influence St. Denis and Humphrey wielded over American dance, see Suzanne Shelton, Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1981).

¹²Mazo, Prime Movers, 118. Mazo entitled his chapter on Doris Humphrey, "The Eloquence of Balance," 117-152.

each object, even the smallest prop, occupied a carefully designated position. Inspired and encouraged by Humphrey to further her dance ambitions by broadening her training repertoire, Post crossed the Atlantic in 1930. The attention given to modern dance in Europe was growing. Humphrey believed Post should take advantage of the new directions being explored in dance, especially in Germany.¹³

An excited twenty-year-old, Post arrived in Europe anxious to take on the demands posed by choreographer-trainer Mary Wigman. Much of Wigman's choreography emphasized the display of a grievous postwar German people expressed through human movement. Requiring immense quantities of physical, as well as emotional, energy, the program proved draining and quickly took its toll on Post. Not long after her arrival she contracted pneumonia, which forced her to drop out of the dance troupe. Upon recovery, Post travelled to France to visit an American friend, and then she joined her sister Helen Post in Vienna. Choosing not to pursue dance any further, Post decided to resume the studies in education and child psychology that she had begun in New York. She enrolled at the University of Vienna, a place that offered new experiences and provided a stimulating education for a young, impressionable student.¹⁴

Living amid student activists, Post got a firsthand

¹³Boddy, "Photographing Women," 156-157.

¹⁴Post Wolcott File, Stryker Collection.

glimpse of the tense and often violent political scene in Austria. During her second year at the university, a general strike shut it down. As the National Socialist Party gained ground in Austria, demonstrations grew more frequent. Post recalled, "I heard the heavy artillery bombardment of the Socialist workers' housing in Floridsdorf, whose occupants had demonstrated against encroaching Fascists. The complex was demolished and the uprising quelled."¹⁵ Students in Vienna played active roles in politics, and significant changes took place in a city previously known for its political conservatism. The students employed every possible method to spread their messages, but found photography to be a particularly useful medium. The popularization of photography on the European continent, especially in German and Austrian metropolitan areas, meant that the public became exposed to a great quantity of photographs in the daily newspapers and in other publications. A growing number of photo clubs provided outlets for both amateur and professional work. But perhaps the most significant influence was the workers' photography movement, which emphasized the importance of recording everyday activities. The photographer and subject were bound together through their own understanding of one another. Above all, the movement preferred the documentary approach and focussed its cameras upon "working

¹⁵Wolcott, "Women in Photography" speech.

environments and working conditions."¹⁶ Photography scholars Hanno Hardt and Karin Ohrn point out the emphasis on collective endeavor in the worker photographs:

The theme is not one of individuals, but of a mass -- even "the masses" -- of people engaged in a coordinated activity. The context of that activity, whether in the streets or in the work place, defines their role, while the size of the group suggests their power to define the setting as their own, one in which they, as a group, assert control.¹⁷

The workers' movement reached its height while Post lived in Europe. Here she received both a sound political education and her first camera.

Post bought a small, 4x4 Rolleiflex camera at the recommendation of Trude Fleischmann. Fleischmann, a self-employed photographer in Vienna, was a close friend of Helen Post, Marion's sister. Helen introduced the two women. Knowing little about cameras, Marion simply told Fleischmann that she wanted a camera and had no real preference as to style or model. Fleischmann allowed Marion to borrow her camera for a while to give it a trial run. Having nothing to compare the camera to, she was impressed by the Rollei's

¹⁶Hanno Hardt and Karin B. Ohrn, "The Eyes of the Proletariat: The Worker-Photography Movement in Weimar Germany," Studies in Visual Communication 7 (Summer 1981): 46-57. Cf. Colin Osman and Sandra S. Phillips, "European Visions: Magazine Photography in Europe between the Wars," in Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America, ed. Marianne Fulton (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1988), 74-103.

¹⁷Hardt and Ohrn, "Eyes of the Proletariat," 53.

twin lens reflex, which allowed the photographer to view the scene and thus permitted more accurate composition. A good price and favorable exchange rate made possible Post's purchase of her own Rollei. A type of "candid camera," the small four by four she bought was an extremely popular, quite versatile, model. Post remembered that the small Rollei was appropriate for the documentary style of photography that was growing more fashionable at that time in Vienna and throughout Austria.¹⁸

Having her photographs praised by Fleischmann increased Post's excitement about her newfound hobby, but she had only a limited time left to capture Austrian scenes.¹⁹ By the summer of 1934, all political parties had supposedly been dissolved by Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss' authoritarian regime. The strongest opposition remained the burgeoning National Socialist Party, whose Austrian members opted to protect themselves by murdering Dollfuss in July of 1934. Though interested in the political scene in Vienna, Post sensed the oncoming defeat of any democratic movement. She had seen local fascists harrass peasant families in the mountains and destroy their crops. An unforgettable

¹⁸Marion Post Wolcott, interview conducted by Richard Doud, 18 January 1965, Mill Valley, California, transcript, Archives of American Art [hereafter cited as Post Wolcott-Doud interview].

¹⁹Boddy, "Photographing Women," 158; also, Wolcott, "Women in Photography" speech, where Wolcott recalled that Fleischmann told her she had "an exceptionally good eye."

experience in Berlin also left its mark. While on a brief visit, Post attended a Nazi rally. She found herself surrounded by hundreds of people roused by the words of Adolf Hitler. The frenzied exhibition so shocked and frightened her that she decided to leave Europe. Unable to withstand the uncertainties connected with increasing political violence, Post returned to the United States.²⁰

Upon her return Post accepted a teaching job at Hessian Hills, a private "progressive" school in Croton-on-Hudson, New York. She was fortunate to have gotten the position at a time when many schools were closing or the school years were being shortened because of the Depression. An even greater achievement was that she, as a young single woman new to the teaching field, received the offer even though national attitudes had grown more antagonistic toward single women who filled the places unemployed men needed so desperately. Men made considerable gains in the teaching profession at this time while young single women "lost ground." Post had returned from abroad to teach in a country where "economic competition, structural changes, and public sentiment all worked to the advantage of men at the expense of female teachers."²¹ Post recognized that the

²⁰Post Wolcott-Doud interview; Wolcott, "Women in Photography" speech.

²¹Lois Scharf, "Even Spinsters Need Not Apply," in To Work and To Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 85.

most striking disparities, though, were based upon class differences, rather than gender differences. Beverly Brannan has pointed out that Post discovered "her heightened political awareness made her increasingly uncomfortable with the class differences she observed between the upper middle class children she taught and the poor children in the neighborhood where she boarded."²² Post took the opportunity to sharpen her photographic skills by snapping pictures of her school children busily engaged in daily activities. With help from her sister Helen, who had served as a photographer's apprentice in Vienna, Marion learned the basics of developing and printing film. When some of her students' parents offered to buy her photographs, Post saw the potential profit her hobby could bring. She decided to leave her unappealing job and spend more time with her camera, while hoping to "earn at least a partial living on it."²³

Her photograph collection contained more than just classroom shots. Post had spent her weekends capturing Group Theatre scenes -- initial rehearsals, opening-night performances, dressing room activities, and summer workshops.²⁴ Again finding it a fruitful enterprise, she provided aspiring actors quality photographs for their

²²Brannan, Conference keynote address.

²³Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

²⁴Post Wolcott File, Stryker Collection.

portfolios. She hoped the money earned in the theatre, combined with savings from her teaching job and a small inheritance from her father, would allow her freedom to branch out and time to develop her skills. Enthusiastic about the new possibilities, Post set out in 1936 to establish herself as a freelance photographer.²⁵

In the mid-thirties, the Workers' Film and Photo League frequently sponsored lectures and exhibits at various photo clubs. Just a few weeks before she had resigned her teaching job, Post had attended a photo club meeting in Manhattan, where Ralph Steiner spoke as the featured guest.²⁶ After the lecture Post approached him, introduced herself, and expressed her growing interest in photography. Steiner asked that she assemble some of her photographs and bring them to his studio the following weekend. After scrutinizing Post's work and discussing it with her, Steiner invited her to join a small group of students who met with him on weekends. For several months Post attended Steiner's informal workshops and found them to be helpful. Each week the students examined samples from Steiner's large assortment of photographs. He guided them in analyzing other photographers' work, as well as their own. He gave weekly technical assignments to the young, aspiring photographers. When they reassembled he would critique each

²⁵Boddy, "Photographing Women," 160.

²⁶Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

individual's work and would lend advice when appropriate. Post recalled that Steiner's assignments were "very vague" - he wanted each person to use his own material and to employ individual creativity to its fullest extent. Steiner felt it was necessary for them to record their "own impressions" in their "own way."²⁷ Steiner used to ask photographers:

Which is worth more -- an apple or a photograph of an apple? After all, the apple has taste, smell, nutrition, three dimensions, life, while a photograph is flat, inedible, etc. Naturally, the answer is that if the photographer has included a bit of himself in the photograph, then the photograph outweighs the apple itself, since a man outweighs an apple.²⁸

Adhering to a strict policy of honest photography, Steiner believed if a person made a statement, in pictures or words, false to his own identity, then he was lying.²⁹

The inspiring combination of Ralph Steiner's teaching and his colleague Paul Strand's photography left an indelible impression on Marion Post. The critical eye Steiner applied to her work -- the eye concerned solely with what photographs had to say -- helped Post finely tune her technique. His earliest criticism addressed her approach as

²⁷Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

²⁸Ralph Steiner, A Point of View, introduction by William Van Dyke (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 8.

²⁹Ibid., 31.

being "too artistic and somewhat directionless."³⁰ Though not as explicitly critical of Post's photography, but certainly as influential, Strand led by example. Post revered his work, the rich tones and textures he created on photographic paper.³¹ As she strove to improve, Post reaped the benefits and was able to market some of her photographs, a few to educational magazines and similar publications. Her rapid development as a photographer did not escape Steiner, who respected Post's work to the extent that he asked her to accompany him to Tennessee on a documentary filmmaking trip. Steiner needed someone to take still photographs for promotional purposes while he completed a project entitled, "People of the Cumberlands." His film focussed on the Highlander Folk School, an institution near Chattanooga that trained people to lead the campaigns for social justice, among them rights for labor and enfranchisement of blacks. The school posed a threat to southern businessmen, while it appeared to some politicians to be a breeding ground for subversive ideas. The trip

³⁰Hank O'Neal, A Vision Shared: A Classical Portrait of America and its People, 1935-1943 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 174.

³¹Joan Murray, "Marion Post Wolcott: A Forgotten Photographer," American Photographer (March 1980), 86.

proved an educational experience for Post, who claimed that her "social conscience was nourished."³²

Post's travels continued when Fortune magazine sent her into rural areas of the Midwest. Her photographs were to accompany a feature story on consumer cooperatives, an increasingly popular means used by farmers and small community dwellers to obtain necessities at cheaper prices. In Waukegan, Illinois, Post captured scenes of a Finnish co-op where workers baked their own bread, homogenized and bottled local milk, carried a full line of groceries, and sold gasoline. One of Post's best photographs of the Waukegan co-op shows a horse-drawn wagon and driver preparing to make early-morning milk deliveries. With the assignment, she also travelled to Noble County, Indiana, to photograph a farmers' cooperative with its own flour mill and to Dillonvale, Ohio, where one of the country's oldest cooperatives was located. The Fortune assignment gave Post considerable exposure as a serious photographer. Of the negatives printed, twenty-one were published in the March, 1937, issue of Fortune, along with a thirteen-page story entitled, "Consumer Cooperatives."³³

³²Wolcott, "Women in Photography" speech; also, John M. Glen, Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), and Aimee Isgrig Horton, The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1932-1961 (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989).

³³"Consumer Cooperatives," Fortune XV (March 1937), 133-146.

After completing a few Associated Press projects, Post received a recommendation to work as a staff photographer at the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin. With no previous newspaper experience, she took the job, joining nine other staff members, all men.³⁴ Being a woman on a major newspaper staff was quite a rarity; Post was probably the only woman in the United States to hold such a position.³⁵ The pressure and competition existent in a profession dominated by men kept her busy perfecting her technical skills. The Bulletin provided her with a large Speed Graphic, a camera common to news work, but one completely unfamiliar to Post. She recalled that her fellow photographers on the staff provided all the help she requested about learning to operate the new model, but she first had to prove that she was serious about her work.³⁶ After they had given Post a proper initiation by spitting in and putting out cigarette butts in her developer and by bombarding her with spit balls, she lost her temper. Post remembered:

Finally I exploded -- telling them that I was there to stay; I had to earn a living, too: this was where I was going to do it, and they'd better darned well like it. I told them how and

³⁴Neal, A Vision Shared, 174.

³⁵Penelope Dixon, Photographers of the Farm Security Administration: An Annotated Bibliography, 1930-1980 (New York: Garland, 1983), 161.

³⁶Post Wolcott File, Stryker Collection.

when I could be very useful to them and that I need their help in return.... We reached a truce.³⁷

The first few months Post did "the regular run of newspaper assignments."³⁸ Then the Bulletin decided to step up its fashion service. Initially Post was paired with a female reporter, but Post ended up doing practically all the material for the fashion and society pages alone. She soon felt stifled by having to shoot too many garden parties and designer shows. She decided to take a trip to New York City and air her frustrations to her critic-mentor Ralph Steiner.

Steiner listened as Post described her disgust with the mundane Bulletin assignments. Sensing her strong desire for more interesting tasks he told her about Roy Stryker's team at the Farm Security Administration in Washington. Steiner showed her a few FSA photographs, then explained the purpose of the Historical Section, since she was not acquainted with the project. He suggested that she contact Stryker in order to set up an interview. Steiner not only helped her make photo selections for her portfolio, but he also wrote a recommendation for her. He wrote a second introduction to a friend of his at the Housing Administration. Armed with two letters from a highly reputable source, Post promptly began

³⁷Wolcott, "Women in Photography" speech.

³⁸Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

planning a trip to Washington.³⁹ While she planned, Ralph Steiner travelled to Washington carrying some of her photographs, which he personally presented to Stryker; and Paul Strand wrote a glowing recommendation to Stryker stating, "If you have any place for a conscientious and talented photographer you will do well to give her an opportunity."⁴⁰ The following week Stryker received a simply-stated request on Philadelphia Evening Bulletin letterhead. It read, "At Ralph Steiner's suggestion I am writing you concerning a job. He showed you some of my photographs last weekend, and I am very anxious to discuss the possibilities with you."⁴¹ In less than two weeks, Stryker decided to hire Marion Post as a full-time photographer with the Farm Security Administration. She later said, "Roy E. Stryker took a chance."⁴²

Stryker's appointment of Post to the FSA photographic crew may have surprised some of his other staff members. Post was young, still in her twenties, and she had handled a camera for only three and a half years. Some other members of Stryker's unit regarded themselves veterans of the craft,

³⁹Post Wolcott-Doud interview; Post Wolcott File, Stryker Collection.

⁴⁰Strand to Stryker, 20 June 1938.

⁴¹Post to Stryker, 26 June 1938, Roy Emerson Stryker Papers, Correspondence, microfilm edition, ed. David Horvath, University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Louisville, Kentucky [hereafter cited as Stryker Papers].

⁴²Post Wolcott File, Stryker Collection.

having mastered all steps of photography, from initial light judgment to final print development. Several, including Dorothea Lange and former employee Carl Mydans, could boast numerous nationwide photo publications in Life, Look, and other magazines. One other significant member, Walker Evans, had accompanied author James Agee on a Fortune assignment into Hale County, Alabama, in the summer of 1936. Their collaboration produced a substantial body of work that Fortune decided not to publish, but that Houghton, Mifflin Company published five years later under the title, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.⁴³ The FSA photographers' various successes may have outnumbered those on Post's resume, but her critical eye soon made her one of Stryker's most valuable assets.

Scores of books, essays, studies, and surveys in the 1930s were directed toward discovering and uncovering America and its people. To add to the search, hundreds of thousands of photographs were taken. If Carl Sandburg's epic poem, "The People, Yes," affirmed with words the beauty

⁴³Stryker Papers, Correspondence between Stryker and Lange, Mydans, and Evans, respectively, reveals detailed information not only on Resettlement Administration objectives and work, but also on outside employment each of the three sought at one time or another. Mydans left the Historical Section in the summer of 1936. Lange tended to venture in and out, doing special assignments and projects, then returning to Stryker's team to complete her FSA shooting scripts. A particularly interesting letter, from Evans to Stryker, 28 February, 1938, describes the painful process of getting "the book" published. He complains incessantly about the red tape, governmental bureaucracy, and publisher's rejections.

of a collective identity, then the Farm Security Administration photographs met and surpassed it with visual images. No other single source was comparable to the FSA file. Each FSA photographer took on the responsibilities of redefining the agency's role in the latter part of the decade. What had begun as a public relations project in 1935, a job to convince the American people that New Deal resettlement programs were desperately needed, changed a couple of years later.⁴⁴ Stryker, recognizing that pictures of poverty-stricken farmers, exhausted migrant mothers, and disease-plagued families had circulated sufficiently, reconsidered his strategy and the role of the FSA. An economic downturn in 1937 had left New Deal agencies open to severe criticism. An increasingly skeptical, and often hostile, Congress demanded evidence that programs such as the FSA were effectively handling the problems of poverty. Stryker realized that the FSA would survive only if he redirected its objectives. The immediate usefulness of FSA photographs had already been demonstrated, as they found their ways into the country's best-selling non-fiction books and growing number of picture magazines. Stryker willingly shared the photographs with popular publications of the day, including Life, Look, Camera, and Midweek Pictorial. Other

⁴⁴Originally known as the Historical Section, the photography arm operated initially under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration (1935-1937), then was moved to the Farm Security Administration (1937-1942), and finally merged into the Office of War Information (1942-1943).

federal agencies took advantage of the mounting FSA collection, as the "honest photograph" proved its "inherent educational power."⁴⁵ Stryker, a former economics professor at Columbia University, had used photographs in his classroom presentations years earlier.⁴⁶ As the FSA file grew, the director recognized the tremendous opportunities before him to show America to Americans. In Stryker's opinion, the collection would someday be of historical value, and he wanted to make it as complete and representative a picture of America as possible. Alan Trachtenberg has pointed out that Stryker "adopted the idea of a historical record with evangelical fervor...."⁴⁷ The original New Deal public relations project turned into a nationwide search for America, one that would be defined not in words, but in pictures.

Stryker had definite objectives in mind for the FSA, but he allowed his photographers a great deal of freedom. Beverly Brannan, curator of photography at the Library of Congress, has pointed out that Stryker's "willingness to let

⁴⁵James C. Anderson, ed., Roy Stryker: The Humane Propagandist, (Louisville, Ky.: University of Louisville Photographic Archives, 1977), 4.

⁴⁶Stange, "The Management of Vision," 6. Cf. F. Jack Hurley, Portrait of A Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1972).

⁴⁷Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in Documenting America, 1935-1943, ed. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 58.

the photographers follow their instincts reflected not only a general confidence in their abilities but also the certainty that the discoveries they made in the field would lead to a diverse selection of photographs for the file."⁴⁸ Stryker's intention to balance the file led him to encourage his photographers to capture more scenes of the good life in America, yet he chose not to dictate their shot selection.⁴⁹ He wanted more pictures of families and community gatherings and flourishing small towns, the places where collective strength and cooperative efforts were frequently displayed. Although he was a friend of sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd, Stryker disagreed with their less-than-flattering assessment of community life in their studies, Middletown (1929) and Middletown in Transition (1937). With FSA photography, he hoped to provide a contrasting image, one which would prove that the small town in America was alive and well and that its inhabitants remained committed to home, family, church, and community. Stryker hoped his photographers would capture the uplifting spirit of unity that bound people together in close-knit communities -- he believed such a spiritual climate characterized most small towns in America. Historian James Curtis has argued that Stryker "wanted to counter Lynd's portrait of declining family solidarity with fresh visual evidence.... [He] needed

⁴⁸Brannan and Fleischhauer, Documenting America, 10.

⁴⁹Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

a counterweight to assure his contemporaries that home life still mattered, that it was a basic determinant of American values."⁵⁰ Curtis further noted that Stryker "took this campaign seriously."⁵¹ Fortunately, the FSA director hired photographer Marion Post soon after he began his campaign. Her personal vision, molded by her experience with cooperative efforts both at home and abroad, helped her support the FSA as it headed in a new direction.

The FSA, as a proponent of the documentary spirit that prevailed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, stood as the incomparable conveyor of thirties culture. Though government-sponsored, the agency's photography section differed from the WPA's photography division. Beaumont Newhall stated the differences between the two programs:

This [FSA] was a more liberal kind of project than the WPA. The WPA was a subsistence level pay, the Farm Security Administration was a professional pay, not high but far above the pay that was given for the WPA.... This Farm Security Administration was not an art project, it was an anti-art project, it was not the intention to produce pretty pictures. It was the intention to produce living documents....

⁵⁰James Curtis, Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 103. Cf. Hurley, Portrait of A Decade, 96-102, and Maren Stange, "'Symbols of Ideal Life': Tugwell, Stryker, and the FSA Photography Project," in "Symbols of Ideal Life": Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 89-131.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 101.

However, out of that came some very great art.⁵²

Critic Elizabeth McCausland believed that FSA work provided "the strongest precedent for documentary" in the 1930s. The FSA carried out the motives and values working within the larger society, particularly those connected to creative expression and its accompanying ideologies. McCausland wrote, "Today we do not want emotion from art; we want a solid and substantial food on which to bite, something strong and hearty to get our teeth into.... We want the truth, not rationalization, not idealizations, not romanticizations."⁵³ And yet, the FSA photographers delved deeper into human experience than cameramen on the daily newspapers and the weekly magazines. Beverly Brannan argues that Stryker's work must be separated from "commercial photojournalism" since he kept his eye on the future while he compiled a record for the present.⁵⁴ Stryker plainly distinguished the two:

Our kind of photography is the adjective and

⁵²Newhall-Trovato interview, 13-14; also, Pete Daniel, et al., Official Images: New Deal Photography (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), which compares the various New Deal agencies which used the vehicle of photography in the 1930s.

⁵³McCausland, "Documentary Photography," Photo Notes (January 1939), 2. Cf. William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), in which Stott describes the "documentary impulse" that operated within American culture.

⁵⁴Brannan and Fleischhauer, Documenting America, 10.

adverb. The newspicture is a single frame; ours a subject viewed in a series. The newspicture is dramatic, all subject and action. Ours shows what's in back of the action. It is a broader statement -- frequently a mood, an accent, but more frequently a sketch and not infrequently a story.⁵⁵

Amazingly, Stryker accomplished his goals using only ten principal photographers in eight years. For several of those years, three or fewer of the photographers travelled on the FSA payroll.

Twenty-three hundred dollars a year, five dollars a day for field time, four and a half cents a mile to pay gas, oil, and car depreciation -- these figures comprised the total salary offered to Marion Post as a new FSA employee. In addition, she could count on the agency to provide her with film, flashbulbs, and some other equipment. Stryker informed her that the section's photographers primarily used three camera models, the Leica, the Contax, and the 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 Speed Graphic. In a letter to Post explaining terms of employment, Stryker reiterated the fact that all negatives had to go into the official file. Each time her camera shutter clicked, the negative automatically became the property of the U.S. Government, which had sole authority over its use. This posed a problem for Stryker.

⁵⁵Roy E. Stryker, "The FSA Collection of Photographs," in Stryker and Nancy Wood, In This Proud Land (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 7-8.

who fought a constant struggle to secure credit lines in nationally-published materials for FSA photographers.⁵⁶ Such paternalistic care for his photographers especially characterized Stryker's relationship with his newest field employee. Administrative details aside, Stryker expressed his concern about having Post travel alone on assignments in the field. Assuring her of his confidence in her ability to take care of herself, he nevertheless told her, "I do have grave doubts of the advisability of sending you, for instance, into certain sections of the South."⁵⁷ However, he knew various other problem areas of the country needed to be researched and reviewed by the FSA, so he pushed these worries out of his mind temporarily. Meanwhile, he used the month of July, 1938, to plan the first assignments for Post's three-month trial period as an FSA photographer.

As Stryker prepared for Post's arrival in Washington, Marion tied up loose ends in Philadelphia. She described parting from her colleagues at the Bulletin as "painless and friendly... They were very pleasant and understanding when they realized that I had definitely decided to leave."⁵⁸ After finally making her way to Washington the last week in August, Post received a spectacular initiation. Rather than subject his new employee to lengthy explanations and

⁵⁶Stryker to Post, 14 July 1938, Stryker Papers.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Post to Stryker, July 1938, Stryker Papers.

detailed instructions, Stryker turned her loose in the photograph files, the thousands of prints, among them Arthur Rothstein's "dust bowl" scenes, Dorothea Lange's hopeful faces, Walker Evans' proud sharecroppers, Russell Lee's yearning children. The impression the photographs left on Marion -- the magnitude, the depth -- proved overwhelming. She recalls that she was "overcome and amazed and fascinated.... The impact of the photos in the file was terrific."⁵⁹ Besides sheer quantity, the file pictures projected a quality of honesty that impressed Post. Viewing them not as individual works but as a unique group of documents overflowing with emotional strength, Post realized, without a doubt, that she wanted to contribute to this vast collection.⁶⁰

The first month's experience, though wonderfully stimulating and thought-provoking, also left Post feeling somewhat inadequate, since her past year and a half had been devoted to nothing but newspaper work. She feared that she would fail to live up to the high standards set by the other FSA photographers, most of whom had considered themselves artists as much as picture takers. Logistical matters also

⁵⁹Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

⁶⁰Ibid.; also, "American Images: Photographs and Photographers from the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1942," videotape, Amarillo Art Center, 1979. The program, which later aired on PBS, was taped at an FSA reunion/symposium that brought together after 50 fifty years Wolcott, Rothstein, Lee, Jack Delano, John Collier, Jr., and Ed Rosskam.

threatened Post. She wondered if she would be able to keep up the travel pace, find time to write background photo stories, remember to caption every negative, then get the material back to Washington not only in an orderly form but also on schedule. Nervous as she might be, Post remained ecstatic about her new position, believing she could "contribute something important, work that might inform and influence the American people and affect legislative reforms. Be a crusader!"⁶¹

Post came into the Historical Section at a crucial time, a period of transition for the FSA. Attention began to focus not solely on destitution and poverty, but also on the positive effects of FSA programs across the country.⁶² If the FSA was to stay alive, the images produced by the three staff photographers, Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, and Post, had to mirror the successes of FSA migratory camps and other farm projects. Economic and political circumstances had left the FSA in a difficult position. The FSA had never had a political constituency, since the

⁶¹Murray, "Marion Post Wolcott," 86.

⁶²John Fischer to Regional Information Advisers, Special Memorandum on Photography, 4 May 1938, Office Files--Field Correspondence, Written Records of the FSA-OWI, Lot 12024, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress; Fischer, the U.S. agriculture department's director of information, lined out in this three-page memo the reorganization of the photography project. He pointed out the huge task FSA photographers faced in trying to cover the entire country and keep their work up-to-date, and he asked that regional offices be as helpful as possible in expediting the work.

scores of sharecroppers and migrants were "voteless or inarticulate." The natural enemies of the agency, southern landlords and large farm operators, had both votes and voices and certainly wanted to maintain their supply of cheap labor. They vehemently objected to any aid the FSA might offer to tenant farmers. As a result, strong Congressional representation of the FSA's opponents purposefully kept the agency's appropriations as low as possible.⁶³ In addition, recession (tagged "Roosevelt's Depression") had hit hard in 1937. Stock prices declined rapidly and unemployment rose, leaving the business community ready to strike out angrily at the administration. But once again, those who endured the harshest effects were tied to the soil, the victims of agriculture. Sidney Baldwin, in Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration, identified them as:

...marginal midwestern farmers for whom the drought meant total failure; southern tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers for whom restriction of cash crops meant eviction from their rented lands and homes or complete destitution where they were; subsistence farmers of Appalachia who were actually outside of the farm economy; and migratory farm laborers for whom the filtering-

⁶³William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). 141.

down effects of rising prices was a snare and a delusion.⁶⁴

The downturn in the economy dealt a grave blow to New Dealers. It proved to them that their programs had not packed the force necessary to break economic cycles. With self-confidence at a low ebb, they hesitated to employ any drastic measures as correctives.

In the wake of economic and political rumblings, Stryker opted to give Post a different role from those his earlier photographers had assumed. The major projects -- FDR's "lower third" of the nation, the Okies, the dust bowl -- had been completed. Post then would fill in some gaps. As she described it:

Roy, at the time I came into the group, wanted to fill in, wanted pictures of lush America. wanted things to use as contrast pictures in his exhibits, wanted more 'canned goods' of the FSA positive remedial program that they were doing. Partly, I think, to keep his superiors happy so that they would continue to support his program.⁶⁵

Having instructions unlike her predecessors at the FSA, Post would be required to meet deadlines more frequently. In addition, she would hold numerous appointments with FSA

⁶⁴Sidney Baldwin, Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 158.

⁶⁵Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

supervisors so they could show her the "good side" of local programs.

Her first month in Washington, Post stayed close to the FSA office, learning procedures and methods and reading some literature suggested by Stryker.⁶⁶ She also absorbed the sound advice offered by Rothstein, a seasoned veteran on the FSA team. When Post received her first field assignment, she collected and packed supplies Rothstein had helped her acquire, including an axe he had given her, insisting she always have it close at hand when travelling.⁶⁷

The initial journey Post made as a field photographer took her into the Bluefield and Welch coal mining regions of West Virginia, a "strange assignment for someone who was supposed to capture the grandeur of the continent."⁶⁸ Stryker's intentions were clear-cut, though. Photographs of these sites would readily please the "higher-ups."⁶⁹ Post's brief stint in West Virginia fascinated her, despite the

⁶⁶Stryker, always the college professor, loaded his photographers down with reading material, books, essays, and reports, to prepare them for the regions where they would be travelling. Some of his assignments may be found in the Stryker Papers; others in the Supplementary Reference Files, Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Collection, Lot 12024, Prints and Photographs Department, Library of Congress.

⁶⁷O'Neal, A Vision Shared, 175.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Stryker to Post, 21 September 1938, Stryker Papers.

continual frustrations of inclement weather. She reported to FSA office secretary Clara "Toots" Wakeham:

If it hadn't stopped raining, I'm afraid I'd have been driven to the Christian Science Reading Room or Myra Deane's Elimination Baths (both right next to the hotel), just for a change or purge, you know.⁷⁰

Earlier, Stryker had advised her not to let weather, among other things, get her down. As the skies cleared, Post turned her attention toward the people, whose attitudes surprised her enough to dispel some of the preconceived notions she had carried with her.

Post found the people not quite as pitiable as she had expected. Collectively, they still possessed a certain drive and maintained a sense of hope. Individually, they survived despite critical health problems traditionally linked to mine work, particularly tuberculosis and black

⁷⁰Post to Clara Dean Wakeham, September 1940 [?], Stryker Papers. Apparently the date provided on this letter is incorrect (Post had failed to date it at the time). From the tone of the letter, Post is a relatively new employee, still a bit insecure, and speaks of Roy Stryker very formally -- "The last thing Mr. Stryker said to me was that I should take my time. I've been working hard & gotten quite a lot..." In contrast, by 1940, she addresses Stryker as "Roy" or "Papa" or any number of other humorous titles. A second clue is that in September, 1940, Post was immersed in a project in East Kentucky, then had to move hurriedly to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to confer with Professor Howard Odum on his proposal to use FSA pictures with his collected material for publication. A final point to be made is that Post was assigned to the coal mining areas of West Virginia only once, in the autumn of 1938. I believe the letter in question, from which the quote was taken, was written the last week in September, 1938.

lung. Appalled by the countless numbers in bad health, Post recorded several striking images. One often-published photograph shows a lean young woman, victim of tuberculosis, perched upon a tiny porch rail. A half smile offsets her dark, tired eyes. Forty years after the print became part of the immense FSA collection, Witkin Gallery in New York City displayed it in a Marion Post Wolcott exhibition. In his review of the show, critic Ben Lifson wrote of this particular picture that he saw not a pathetic, sick woman whose miner husband had lost his job, but "an image full of rough and perplexing sexuality. After all, we're supposed to see these poor people as sufferers, not as vital and occasionally alluring."⁷¹ Perhaps he realized that viewers of "Depression photographs" frequently failed to allow the people in the pictures complete humanity.

In an excellent treatment of the documentary genre, William Stott attempted to explain this phenomenon. One photograph or even a series of photographs of family or community dwellers show one very little about the actual "real life" experiences of the people involved. Stott believes that innocent victims' lives tend to be "simplified, ennobled, sentimentalized" by the social documentary photographers:

⁷¹Ben Lifson. "Post Wolcott: Not A Vintage Show." Village Voice (23 July 1979), 70.

[The subjects] come to us only in images meant to break our heart. They come helpless, guiltless as children and, though helpless, yet still unvanquished by the implacable wrath of nature -- flood, drought -- and the indifference of their society.... Never are they vicious, never depraved, never responsible for their misery.⁷²

Stott contends that the photographers of the 1930s intentionally sought out "the look" in the faces they captured on film. The look was characteristically poignant and desperate, yet full of dignity and honesty. After completing her West Virginia assignment, Post believed that she, too, should record "the look" to a certain extent. She admitted that she and her FSA colleagues shared similar views about their work as it related to the Section's goals. She noted the depth of social consciousness each photographer possessed and the genuine concerns each felt about "the plight of human beings," but she reiterated that their individual approaches remained varied and distinctive.⁷³ Post's own specialty would reveal her love for people, her empathy for their unique situations, and her strong belief in cooperative effort.

With the inaugural journey behind her, Post appeared solidly prepared to take on a grander assignment. The final prints of her West Virginia negatives had shown Post's versatility as a photographer. She had produced a wide

⁷²William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 58.

⁷³Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

spectrum of emotion-packed images, some uplifting. others not. More significantly, she came away with the evidence for which Stryker was looking, and "the quality of her pictures was undisputed."⁷⁴ Having proved her skill, Post got ready to make her first trip into the American South. A challenging venture lay ahead, for in no other region of the country did the FSA meet with such vicious opposition. The agency was considered "a disturber of the peace" in the South, where "virtually every FSA program and policy seemed to touch a nerve."⁷⁵

The southern trek led Post down through the Carolinas and on into Florida for an in-depth study of the migratory laborers. Stryker's instructions included a list of names of people with whom Post should meet and discuss future plans, including possible publication of FSA photographic projects. One of her first acquaintances, University of North Carolina Press editor W. T. Couch, presented the idea of combining FSA photography with Writers' Guide compilations and other products of the Federal Writers' Project.⁷⁶ In the next three and a half years Post would remain in relatively close contact with Couch and would travel to Chapel Hill whenever Stryker could fit it into her

⁷⁴Dixon, Photographers of the FSA, 162.

⁷⁵Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, 279.

⁷⁶Stryker to Dorothea Lange, 22 December 1938, Stryker Papers.

schedule. Stryker himself recognized the need for frequent publication of FSA photos, particularly as domestic problems gave way to foreign policy concerns. A well-respected press, under Couch's interest and leadership, could provide Stryker that security.

Unfortunately not all of Post's meetings proceeded as smoothly as her visit with Couch. Early in December, 1938, in the first days of her journey south, Post voiced anxiety about her experience at Duke University. Although the officials there cooperated with her, she ran into a number of "disturbing circumstances & problems."⁷⁷ Most of these she attributed to the fact that the people assisting her were not the least bit aware of which subjects she wished to photograph. They had arranged no agenda -- shooting sites, schedules -- for Post to follow. The time she lost in Durham proved to be a minor disappointment when compared to a similar ordeal in Columbia, South Carolina, a couple of days before Christmas. Assigned to meet Mr. Derieux, her FSA guide, Post hoped to get several interesting pre-Christmas shots of people and places. But the slow-moving Derieux kept Post waiting in his office until noon. Angry that she had missed the good morning light for shooting, Post resolved to snap a few quality afternoon photographs. Instead, she spent the better part of the afternoon hours admiring holly trees at the request of Mrs. Derieux, who had

⁷⁷Post to Stryker, December 1938, Stryker Papers.

insisted upon going along for the ride. With sunlight fading at day's end, Post realized the precious time wasted. The next morning she awoke to pouring rain, conceded defeat in Columbia, and packed her bags. On a dismal Christmas Eve she headed for Charleston.⁷⁸

Many of Post's discoveries about the South pertained not strictly to the region's inhabitants but to its entire way of life. Appalled by Southern eating habits, Post found that vegetables for one meal usually included "fried potatoes, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, rice, grits, or turnips!"⁷⁹ In addition, the general pace of everyday living caught her off guard:

It's amazing -- even tho [sic] this isn't the deep south -- the pace is entirely different. It takes so much longer to get anything done, buy anything, have extra keys made, or get something fixed, or pack the car. Their whole attitude is different -- you'd think the 'Xmas rush' might stimulate them a little, but not a chance.⁸⁰

The differences in holiday celebration surprised Post, who was taken aback by the overt gaudiness of it all. She noted that the Southern towns she visited were "decked out fit to kill, with more lights and decorations and junk than you

⁷⁸Post to Stryker, 23 December 1938; Post to Stryker, 12 January 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁷⁹Post to Stryker, 23 December 1938, Stryker Papers.

⁸⁰Post to Stryker, December 1938, Stryker Papers.

could find in the 5th Avenue 5 & 10-cent store."⁸¹ But the most surprising display was the constant crackle of exploding firecrackers, sounding off throughout the day and well into the night.

In her years as an FSA field photographer, Post encountered varied reactions to the work she did, the equipment she used, the way she travelled, even the clothes she wore. Though an overwhelming majority of her assignments sent her to the South, Post also crossed the country from New Orleans to New England, and from the Chesapeake to Montana. No regions' natives treated her with more skepticism and doubt than those of the South. Post found the people of South Carolina's swampy lowlands extremely suspicious and very unfriendly. They allowed no strangers inside their homes, and they would not let her take any pictures outside the houses. Mimicking her subjects, Post explained to Stryker their excuses -- they "didn't like for no strangers to come botherin' around because they mostly played 'dirty tricks' on them or brought 'bad luck.'"⁸² Post often resorted to begging and bribing to win them over, and so kept her pockets full of coins and small pieces of food. Some individuals were bold enough to refuse the nickels she offered, asking instead for "real

⁸¹Post to Stryker, 23 December 1938, Stryker Papers.

⁸²Post to Stryker, 12 January 1938, Stryker Papers.

money."⁸³ Post found other ways to acquire people's trust and confidence. She helped women in their kitchens by peeling potatoes, dressed small children in the family, or drove to town to pick up necessities. All were tactics by which Post achieved her objectives -- she won their confidence, and they gave to her uninhibited poses, natural images for her camera.⁸⁴

Many Southerners questioned Post about why she was travelling all alone in their part of the country. In backwoods South Carolina, a small group of people whom Post described as "primitive," accused her of being a gypsy. Post did appear foreign, sporting a deep tan, wearing a bright bandana scarf, elaborate earrings, and pants with pockets. Frightened not only by her looks, the individuals stared in disbelief at the boxes of equipment she carried in her convertible. Afraid that she might kidnap their children, they demanded that she leave immediately.⁸⁵ When Stryker learned of the ordeal he directed a strong suggestion, not unlike a concerned father's reprimand, to Post:

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Wolcott, comments in "American Images" reunion/symposium videotape; also, O'Neal, A Vision Shared, 175.

⁸⁵Post to Stryker, 23 January 1939, Stryker Papers; also, Post Wolcott-Doud interview; and Jean Brownell, "Girl Photographer for FSA Travels 50,000 Miles in Search for Pictures," The Washington Post, (19 November 1940).

I am glad that you have now learned that you can't depend on the wiles of femininity when you are in the wilds of the South. Colorful bandanas and brightly colored dresses, etc., aren't part of our photographer's equipment. The closer you keep to what the great back-country recognizes as the normal dress for women, the better you are going to succeed as a photographer.... I can tell you another thing -- that slacks aren't part of your attire when you are in that back-country. You are a woman, and a woman can't never be a man! '86

She returned a rather fiery, yet humorous, justification for her attire, maintaining that photographers, male or female, must wear trousers with pockets. She argued that female photographers might appear slightly conspicuous with too many film pack magazines and film rolls stuffed in their shirt fronts. Assuring Stryker that he had "touched on a sore subject," Post ended her rebuttal, "I DIDN'T use feminine wiles... My slacks are dark blue, old, dirty & not too tight -- O.K.?"⁸⁷ On the more practical side, Post needed heavy trousers to protect her legs from insects and briars as she took her cameras into the bean fields in Belle Glade, Florida.

Through January and February, 1939, Post followed the migrant camp circuit in Florida. It was the first of three trips she would make to the state in order to record the FSA's success there. The agency had attempted to provide organized, clean dwellings for migratory laborers. Before

⁸⁶Stryker to Post, 13 January 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁸⁷Post to Stryker, 13 January 1939, Stryker Papers.

FSA intervention, living quarters in the tourist and trailer camps where migrants stayed were drastically overcrowded and unsanitary. Large families lived in one-room cabins or small tents. Privacy and respect for property were non-existent. Frequently a man and woman would live together as 'good friends' until the season was over, then they would go their separate ways. Venereal disease was a common health problem among the residents.⁸⁸

Preliminary reading could describe migrant life, but nothing compared to Post's firsthand experience. Early encounters with the fruit pickers made her aware that the last season had been disastrous, especially for citrus growers in central Florida. Crates of fruit sold at the lowest prices ever, leaving the pickers with even less pay than usual. Since Florida had experienced no rainy season that year, the added expense of irrigation drove many growers out of business. Post photographed the remnants of a bad season -- houses and camps abandoned, blown down, or taken apart. The present season promised little relief either, as Post soon realized. Migrant pickers were idle, anxiously awaiting peak season, which had been delayed due to lack of rain. In the Tampa area, a strawberry-growing region, the crop gradually dried up. During a regular

⁸⁸Stryker to Arthur Rothstein, undated, Stryker Papers. Stryker wrote this letter late in 1936 to inform Rothstein of the conditions he could expect to face as he dealt with the migratory laborers.

season, the "fruit tramps" -- men, women, and children who followed the crops -- would travel a route from Homestead, Florida, in January to Ponchatoula, Louisiana, in April to Humboldt, Tennessee, in May to Paducah, Kentucky, in June to Shelby, Michigan, in July. By August they would start the trek back south to Florida. Post found the 1939 season to be exceptional, though. Her research in Belle Glade revealed that about half the usual number of transients were there and that most of these were employed in the packing houses, not the fields. By talking with the migrant laborers she learned that the majority had not travelled long distances to find work. Most came from nearby towns or Key West or the Miami area.⁸⁹ Since fruit tramps spent a considerable amount of their earnings on transportation, extended travelling in a bad season was not economically feasible.

The difficulties of migratory work during a poor citrus fruit season seemed slight compared to the drawbacks of vegetable field work. In the vegetable area, located in the drained swamplands of Florida, availability of jobs depended solely on weather conditions. Tomatoes, celery, lettuce, and bean crops had to be picked at precisely the right time. The 1938-39 winter, with its frosts and its cold, windy weather, had killed almost everything, including a large crop of English peas, a substantial portion of tomatoes, and

⁸⁹Post to Stryker, 13 January 1939, Stryker Papers.

most of the beans. Only a small share of celery, cabbage, and sugar cane survived.⁹⁰ A second shortcoming was that actual work had to be done on hands and knees in the black soil known as "muck." Post complained fiercely about the black muck, a fine, powdery dust; she struggled continuously to keep it out of her cameras and off of her film. In jest. Stryker replied:

We really don't care what the black dust does to you as long as you can work, but I hate like the devil to see it get into your camera, because it hurts your negatives.⁹¹

Time was a key factor in Post's Florida excursion. Because peak picking season had been delayed three to four weeks, Post was unable to capture the choice field shots she desired. A few workers combed the vegetable fields, but the action Post had hoped to find was limited to an afternoon picking session in which several horrific screams and rifle shots drew her to a side road where she eyed a ten-foot-long rattlesnake "as big around as a small stovepipe."⁹² Even though the picking season was slow, Post was willing to wait it out, stay in the Belle Glade-Okkechobee area for a few more weeks, then take the time necessary to get the best

⁹⁰Post to Stryker, January 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁹¹Stryker to Post, 1 February 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁹²Post to Stryker, 13 January 1939, Stryker Papers.

shots, once the transients came to fill the streets and fields and packing houses.

Interested especially in packing house activity, Post wanted to produce a photo story of life there -- "the hanging around, the 'messaging around,' the gambling, the fighting, the 'sanitary' conditions, the effects of the very long work stretch."⁹³ Particularly drawn to the women's experiences, Post talked with one woman who explained the packing house situation. At the time, some houses opened their doors only a few hours a week. The woman had waited outside one house all day hoping to get work. When finally allowed in, she had gotten only nine minutes of worktime, compared to her usual sixteen- or eighteen-hour day during peak season.⁹⁴ Although the idle laborers' stories intrigued Post, they did not offer sufficient substance for FSA photography, in Stryker's opinion. He wrote to her, "We mustn't spend too much time in Florida unless there is an awful lot of pay dirt."⁹⁵ He promised that she could return later but insisted that she concentrate on other subjects. Post decided that if she could not get pictures of the poor, unemployed migrants she would turn her cameras in the opposite direction -- toward the "lazy rich" tourists and residents in the Miami area.

⁹³Post to Stryker, 3 February 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁹⁴Post to Stryker, January 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁹⁵Stryker to Post, 28 January 1939. Stryker Papers.

One of the most highly-praised contributions to the FSA collection, Post's images of the wealthy provide sharp contrasts to the plight of the underprivileged. Her characterizations on film reflect a well-directed intention:

I wanted to show the extent of the gap between the wealthy and the poor; and, despite their marginal and destitute existence, to depict their dignity and courage. To create a general awakening and concern for their appalling conditions. I tried to contrast them with the wealthy and with the complacent tourists in Florida.⁸⁴

Post would stay in Miami overnight then drive just a few miles to the migrant camps during the day. The disparity amazed her. She later told an interviewer, "I thought: 'Wow, this is great. Why not use this material in exhibits and as contrast material?'"⁸⁵ Until Post joined the staff, the FSA files lacked any pictures of those at the upper end of the income scale. Post noted the omission and believed photographs of the elite at play would help tell the American story. Indeed they did help document the conditions that existed. Photography historian Stu Cohen agrees:

The existence satirizes itself. The photographs

⁸⁴Wolcott, excerpt taken from the biographical essay submitted for Contemporary Photographers, ed. Walsh, 606; Beverly Brannan and Carl Fleischhauer chose pictures from Post Wolcott's Miami series for Documenting America, 174-187.

⁸⁵Paul Raedeke, "Introduction + Interview," Photo-Metro, (February 1986), 14.

were, therefore, a perfectly reasonable addition to the FSA files; it is simply unfortunate that they stand there so much apart.⁸⁶

To accomplish her purpose Post employed the techniques learned years before from her dance instructor Humphrey -- use of perfect balance and space. Post decided that the playgrounds of the wealthy would be her stages. The photographs make hotel entrance archways appear massive, and long, shiny automobiles seem larger-than-life. Post's keen eye helped her achieve a superior manipulation of space and scale. Fully reclined in lounge chairs, relaxed tourists smile carelessly as the sun beams down on their faces. Inactivity is cherished, expected, and serves as a stark contrast to the migrants' idleness, which was characterized by worry and anxiety. Post injected into her pictures a consciousness that revealed the irony of her surroundings. In one photograph she focussed on an exquisitely-set table where flawless pats of butter are kept cool by miniature ice cubes. Ben Lifson lauded Post's collection of "rich folk" images:

There's a sense of uneasiness in these pictures, of shock at seeing so much wealth and idleness during such hard times.... [Post] dramatizes just how much of her world is out of whack, and she doesn't have to build allusions to the under-privileged into these pictures to do it.⁸⁷

⁸⁶Cohen in Contemporary Photographers, ed. Walsh, 607.

⁸⁷Lifson, "Not A Vintage Show." 70.

Post found the leisure class as difficult to deal with as any she had previously encountered. Although the majority of her "idle rich" photographs consisted of resort palaces, resident dwellings, and beach scenes, Post became enthralled with the racetrack excitement and sought to capture it accurately and completely. Besides taking crowd shots of stands full of racing enthusiasts, she attempted to record some gambling scenes. The betting men, irate at her temerity, snatched her camera away. They eventually gave it back, but the gamblers kept her film and instructed her to get out and stay out. As she related the story in a personal interview years later, Post explained that the men were most annoyed that she had tried to get away with the stunt simply because she was a woman -- "which was exactly what I was trying to do," she admitted.⁸⁸

The Miami area suited Post's need for rest and time off. The resort beaches were the only places she had been able to swim and sunbathe, since she feared the huge spiders and 'red bugs' that infested the grasses in the migrant picking region. Taking a break from lugging her camera and other equipment around, Post secluded herself and began the long overdue task of captioning some three hundred prints Stryker had mailed from the FSA lab in Washington. He had added a note that she be extra careful in writing

⁸⁸Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

captions because there had been some confusion concerning her West Virginia prints. Promising to devote full attention to the job, Post assured Stryker that she would be "setting out today for some quiet spot where I will be a completely unknown quantity & not be disturbed. I'm going to put on very dark glasses & hang a typhoid fever sign on my front & back & dare anyone to come near me."⁸⁹

Captioning complications plagued every FSA photographer, including Post. Since the photographers were required to send all film to the FSA lab in Washington for developing, it could take weeks before they actually saw their own finished products. One group of negatives Post sent from Florida showed watermarks when printed; another set was smudged with the 'black muck'; and yet another came out blurred, revealing serious shutter maladjustment in the Rolleiflex camera.⁹⁰ When her negatives turned out satisfactorily, Stryker would offer his praise along with a gentle nudge for her to edit scrupulously and to complete caption stories quickly -- "Give your full attention to the

⁸⁹Post to Stryker, 24 February 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁹⁰Stryker to Post, 13 February 1939, Stryker Papers. He told her, "Either the Rolleiflex is out, or you are at fault; something is sure as the devil wrong... I am most certain the fault isn't in the laboratory."

captions, so we can get the stuff mounted up and ready for use."⁹¹

Stryker gave the photographers in his unit much freedom in editing their own work. In Post's case, he believed she leaned toward taking too many exposures of a particular scene or subject, inevitably costing the lab an exorbitant amount in printing.⁹² In an attempt to eliminate the problem, Stryker suggested that Post "kill" a good number of the negatives as she edited and captioned.⁹³ Post respected Stryker's guidance and direction, but she particularly appreciated the unusual liberty he allowed her in editing and cropping her own pictures. He also consulted her about lab work and exhibit layouts, leading Post to remark that he provided an opportunity for "unprecedented creative and artistic expression."⁹⁴ She gained experience and insight unavailable to the routine staff photographer in the 1930s:

⁹¹Stryker to Post, 21 February 1939; Stryker to Post, 16 February 1939, Stryker Papers, in which he tells her she has "some very excellent material included."

⁹²Stryker to Post, 13 February 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁹³Stryker to Post, 1 February 1939, in which he suggests Post "cut pretty ruthlessly"; also, Stryker to Post, 13 February 1939, and Stryker to Post, 21 February 1939, Stryker Papers. The quantity of Post's early work may be determined by examining Stryker's correspondence -- every seven to ten days he sent back to her approximately one hundred rolls of negatives.

⁹⁴Post Wolcott File, Stryker Collection.

I don't know of any magazine that would give you the freedom that Roy gave you in editing your pictures. He would listen to arguments. I mean if he wanted to keep a picture that you wanted to throw out he would certainly give you your chance to say. I suppose in the end he had the last say but if your arguments were valid he would bow to them.... We never had any real struggle about this at all.⁹⁵

Post found that Stryker's fairness extended even further, especially regarding her position with FSA regional advisors. As with all of the unit's photographers, Stryker gave Post the authority to handle the FSA representatives in ways she deemed most appropriate. The advisors, particularly in the South, often turned out to be stubborn and quite hesitant to allow a young woman to plot her own course on "their territory." Some attempted to shield her from the more unsuccessful aspects of the FSA projects, and so limited her travel to the few places they personally wished to have photographed. Post recalled, "They didn't want us to photograph the seedy side of their area, their program; they wanted us to spend much more time, of course, on the progress that they had made."⁹⁶ Having aired her frustrations to Stryker about this kind of treatment, Post received encouraging replies which assured her that she was the boss in those situations. Stryker explained that she, like all the other FSA photographers, was hired because she

⁹⁵Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

⁹⁶Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

was a specialist. As a specialist, she was entitled to the privilege of deciding what should be recorded on film. He further stressed the power of her authority:

Don't take orders on what is to be photographed or how it is to be photographed from anyone.... Don't let those guys put anything over on you. You will have to lie and do all sorts of maneuvering, but it will have to be done -- and you know I will always back you, so be sure that you are right, and you may always depend on my OK and support.⁹⁷

Post realized that Stryker entrusted her with substantial responsibility and that he faithfully relied upon her judgments, leaving "the whole business" to her discretion.⁹⁸

Stryker held the reins tightly, though, when it came to logistics and official details. More than once in the spring of 1939 he had to track down Post. He demanded that she correspond often with the Washington office by mail or telegram, informing it of her whereabouts. In mid-March Post's agenda had her scheduled to leave Florida and proceed toward Montgomery, Alabama. Several days after her expected arrival date, Stryker wrote in a distressed tone, "I don't think you realize yet the importance of keeping us informed at frequent intervals about where we can reach you. Here it is Thursday and we don't know if you got to

⁹⁷Stryker to Post, 1 April 1939, Stryker Papers.

⁹⁸Ibid.; also, Stryker to Post, 11 May 1939, Stryker Papers. Stryker sympathized, "I know that regional people have been making life miserable for you.... As far as chasing around for all these regional people -- forget it!"

Montgomery or not."⁹⁹ The second major rule Post had to learn to follow involved satisfying a bureaucratic system. If she wanted a U.S. Government paycheck, her paperwork had to be completed accurately and submitted on time. The Finance Office required FSA photographers to present the following materials on a regular basis: travel logs showing miles covered, equipment sheets listing film rolls and flashbulbs used, and account forms recording all expenses incurred. At different times Post and each of her colleagues neglected the red-tape, provoking Stryker's threat to "raise hell with all of you people if you don't attempt to do this."¹⁰⁰

In preparing to leave Florida and move into Alabama and Georgia, Post refreshed her memory by scanning the reading material Stryker had sent weeks earlier. Since she would soon be photographing scenes of sharecropping life, Marion reviewed Arthur Raper's Preface to Peasantry (1936), a study of farm tenancy in Greene County, Georgia. Well-respected for his work, Raper received special recognition from FSA staffers. He was genuinely interested in the field photographers' work and never failed to offer his assistance when they came to the Atlanta area. Stryker noted that Raper possessed a keen eye for selecting key sites and

⁹⁹Stryker to Post, 16 March 1939; Stryker to Post, 8 March 1939, Stryker Papers.

¹⁰⁰Stryker to Post, 4 February 1939, Stryker Papers.

angles for FSA photography, even though Raper himself was not a photographer.¹⁰¹

Post was scheduled to meet Raper in Atlanta the last week in March, but first she needed to complete a rush job in Coffee County, Alabama. The area had been devastated by a major flood, and its soil had long been exhausted by intensive farming. Coffee County's farmers had relied solely on the cotton crop until the 1930s, when they were forced to diversify the crop production in order to survive. Some began planting peanuts and beans, while others turned to poultry farming. Washington officials remained curious about the success rate there and were anxious for Stryker's photographers to provide some pictorial evidence. Previously Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, on respective assignments, had attempted to photograph the "new" Coffee County, but neither could produce the desired effect. Unfortunately Post could not supply sufficient material either, which left Stryker the task of informing his friends and superiors in Washington that Coffee County remained unphotogenic. He added, "Three photographers can't be wrong."¹⁰²

Following the frustrated attempt in Coffee County, Post hoped for better luck in accomplishing the assignments awaiting her in Georgia. She was scheduled to spend the

¹⁰¹Stryker to Post, 1 April 1939, Stryker Papers.

¹⁰²Stryker to Post, 6 April 1939, Stryker Papers.

entire months of April and May travelling throughout the state, adhering closely to Raper's suggestions but attending to other matters as well. Post's two-month stint in the state accurately reflects the varied responsibilities an FSA photographer faced, from documenting segregated farm projects to attending small-town celebrations to locating a decent place to get a camera fixed. Using the Henry Grady Hotel in Atlanta as a base, Post initially directed her energy toward one of the more mundane tasks -- shooting a type of "progress report" on the Area Warehouse in Atlanta. Her principal subjects were broken-down tractors, some photographed before repair, others after repair. Besides focusing on farm equipment Post got some inside shots of the work rooms and finished by photographing office space. Though suffering from a cold and slight fever while doing the job, Post completed it thoroughly, as Stryker had asked, and she received highest marks when the negatives were viewed weeks later.¹⁰³

In a three-week period, Post journeyed from Greensboro to Irwinville to Montezuma to Orangeburg then back to Atlanta, where she planned a return trip to Greensboro. A crowded schedule, horrid weather, and temperamental equipment posed numerous problems for her. Although it meant losing some time, Post decided not to drive at night

¹⁰³Post to Stryker, 7 April 1939; Stryker to Post, 27 April 1939, Stryker Papers.

since everything closed early, including the gas stations. She discovered that "the only ones who stay out are bums who are pretty drunk or tough or both."¹⁰⁴ She realized the people would not understand why she remained out alone after dark, so she cautiously avoided the likelihood of confrontation.

Rain kept Post from travelling very far on a couple of occasions. Unable to maneuver her car easily on the slippery red clay, she decided not to drive it. Stranded in a small town, she was left to endure two May Day programs, both ruined by messy weather and seemingly endless boring speeches.¹⁰⁵ A few days later, with weather conditions the same, Post took her Plymouth out on the road again and got stuck twice in the thick clay of the Flint River Valley. While her car was being repaired, mechanics found a faulty rear axle, one that had obviously been broken and welded. Post realized she had driven some 20,000 miles across the South in a defective car she had bought "new," supposedly right off the assembly line. She accepted having gotten a "lemon," since she had purchased it when demand was high, immediately following the auto workers' strikes a few years before.¹⁰⁶ After she had one breakdown repaired, another occurred, this time with the camera equipment. Post had

¹⁰⁴Post to Stryker, 8 May 1939, Stryker Papers.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Post to Stryker, 21 May 1939, Stryker Papers.

constant trouble with the rangefinder, which Eastman Kodak Company in Atlanta attempted to adjust on three different occasions. They bungled the job each time, leaving Post no other alternative than to pack it up and ship it to Washington. Stryker's immediate response included a reprimand concerning her harsh handling of FSA equipment, but his admonition was overshadowed by information that some of her photographs had just been published in Collier's.¹⁰⁷

Post received an exceedingly high overall evaluation on the pictures she provided from her Georgia assignments. Stryker believed the photographs were of excellent quality, particularly the recreational scenes Post captured. His favorite shots included those taken of the Negro projects, of schoolhouse activities, of sandlot baseball games, and of sharecroppers standing in front of log cabins.¹⁰⁸ Post, too, was overwhelmed by the pictures, so much that she found editing even more difficult than usual -- "It's practically impossible for me to throw any of them away because the people and their faces are so often different even tho [sic] the place or situation is similar."¹⁰⁹ Additional praise came from Raper, who travelled to Washington to view the

¹⁰⁷Stryker to post, 25 May 1939, Stryker Papers.

¹⁰⁸Stryker to Post, 20 May 1939, Stryker Papers. The FSA rehabilitation programs were designed in segregated units. Monetary appropriations provided separate housing and supplies to 'white' projects and 'Negro' projects, respectively.

¹⁰⁹Post to Stryker, 1 June 1939, Stryker Papers.

finished prints and requested that Post be assigned to the region again. Raper eventually used several of Post's photographs in his 1941 publication, Sharecroppers All, a look at changes in sharecroppers' lives and how U.S. Government programs had affected them.¹¹⁰

Sweltering heat and voracious mosquitoes -- Post got her share of both while completing her assignments in June, 1939. She spent most of the month in New Orleans as a photographer "lent out" to the U.S. Public Health Service. Public Health, one of a number of government agencies that used FSA pictures, realized the value of documentary photographs in showing the American public the agency's work and progress.¹¹¹ Stryker was very accommodating in scheduling and rearranging his field photographers' travel plans to include such assignments. He recognized their importance to the system as a whole, and he also remained eager to please the 'higher-ups' in Washington.

Post's seven-month journey through the American South neared its end the first week in July, 1939. For all of the

¹¹⁰Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid, Sharecroppers All (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941).

¹¹¹Stryker to Post, 25 May 1939, Stryker Papers. For further explanation of services donated by FSA photographers to other U.S. agencies and departments, see Robert White, "Faces and Places in the South in the 1930s: A Portfolio," in Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies, ed. Jack Salzman (Philadelphia: Franklin & Co., 1975), 415-429; also, Hartley E. Howe, "You Have Seen Their Pictures," Survey Graphic 29 (April 1940): 236-241.

pleasure she derived from her assorted encounters with Southerners and their ways of living, Post welcomed the opportunity to return to Washington. She wrote to Stryker just before heading north:

I'll also be glad of a rest from the daily & eternal questions whether I'm Emily Post, or Margaret Bourke-White, followed by disappointed looks -- or what that 'thing' around my neck is, & how I ever learned to be a photographer, if I'm all alone, not frightened & if my mother doesn't worry about me, & how I find my way. In general I'm most tired of the strain of continually adjusting to new people, making conversation, getting acquainted, being polite & diplomatic when necessary.

In particular I'm sick of people telling me that the cabin or room costs the same for one as it does for two, of listening to people, or the 'call' girl make love in the adjoining room. Or of hearing everyone's bathroom habits, hangovers, & fights thru the ventilator. And even the sight of hotel bedroom furniture, the feel of clean sheets, the nuisance of digging into the bottom of a suitcase, of choosing a restaurant & food to eat.¹¹²

The long-awaited retreat from the field brought Post back close to the FSA headquarters for three months. For the first time she was able to see the total accumulation of her work -- thousands of negatives and prints showed her name in the top right corner. In revealing the South and its inhabitants, Post's contributions were extraordinary.

Stryker had, according to Post, urged his photographers to record and to document America from "the historian's, the sociologist's, and the architect's point of

¹¹²Post to Stryker, 5 July 1939, Stryker Papers.

view."¹¹³ In Since Yesterday, Frederick Lewis Allen discussed documentary images and described the thirties' photographer as "one with the eye of an artist who was simultaneously a reporter or a sociologist."¹¹⁴ In October, 1939, Post left Washington for an assignment in North Carolina, where she would work closely with sociologist Howard Odum at Chapel Hill. One welcome advantage Post discovered when she reached Chapel Hill was the help of several U.N.C. graduate students. Their task was to accompany her into the field and to take notes while she snapped pictures. In his excitement over the prospect of a comprehensive photographic survey, Odum had cordially arranged the extra help for Post. Her assignment entailed covering the tobacco industry, from planting to marketing, in the surrounding areas. Odum seemed extremely anxious to secure as much FSA time as possible for the project. In return for the favor, he pleased Stryker by promising to stir up support and funding to aid the FSA in its attempts to produce a solid publication within the next year.¹¹⁵

¹¹³Post Wolcott File, Stryker Collection.

¹¹⁴Frederick Lewis Allen, Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), 212-213; also, Ansel Adams once told Stryker, "What you've got are not photographers. They're a bunch of sociologists with cameras."

¹¹⁵Post to Stryker, 2 October 1939; Stryker to Post, 17 October 1939, Stryker Papers.

Post immediately recognized the possibilities the region had to offer. She found it well-suited to the use of photography in carrying out social research, particularly since the area boasted such varied characteristics. She felt she could pictorially project all aspects, from the rural farmlands and crop cultivation to the processing industries. The different types of land and terrain and the multitude of crops grown there roused Post's curiosity. She was convinced that even the interested folks at Chapel Hill remained unaware of the endless possibilities photography could offer them in their sociological pursuits.¹¹⁶ Even though Professor Odum frequently looked over her shoulder as she photographed and edited, Post produced many flawless images. During the busy tobacco auctions, which attracted hundreds of people to the larger towns, Post was able to capture the excited feeling of bustling activity and constant money-changing. Auction time put dollars into hands, and Post observed and made records of the faces cautiously deliberating over how and what to buy and of others simply enjoying the hurried atmosphere with enthusiasm. She met with unqualified success.

After a brief post-Christmas swing through Sarasota and West Palm Beach, Florida, Post made her way north, far north, over a thousand miles up to New England. The FSA assignment took her to a region blanketed in fresh snow.

¹¹⁶Post to Stryker, 2 October 1939, Stryker Papers.

Exactly one year earlier, Post had tried every way imaginable to protect her equipment and film from blistering Florida heat; now she faced problems with the freezing cold of a Vermont winter:

Everything stuck & just refused to operate at least half the time. Shutters, diaphragms, range finders, tracks; film & magazine slides become so brittle they just snap in two.¹¹⁷

With temperatures below zero every morning, Post devised creative ways to keep her camera parts warm. She wrapped them in sweaters with a hot water bottle, and when driving she tried to place them as close to the car heater as possible. She pleaded with Stryker to understand her struggle to prevent equipment breakdown in the event her negatives turned out "underexposed, overexposed, out of focus, jittered, in any other way technically not too hot."¹¹⁸ The New England assignment was a significant one since FSA photographers had spent very limited time in the region. The office files included only a few prints of the northeastern United States, so Stryker wanted Post to fill in the gap with a large number of assorted scenes and activities. His specific request was that she get pictures of broad, snowy landscapes.¹¹⁹ In spite of hazardous

¹¹⁷Post to Stryker, 2 March 1940, Stryker Papers.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Stryker to Post, 27 February 1940, Stryker Papers.

driving conditions on icy roads, Post made her way from North Adams, Massachusetts, to Stowe, Vermont, and on up into Maine. In one wealthy section where an exclusive mountain lodge was located, she photographed skiers gliding down the slopes. Post was more interested, though, in the permanent residents of the area, and she purposefully focussed on their seemingly smooth adaptations to fierce weather. Scenes of rugged activity -- men and women clearing snow, cutting wood, logging, and making early morning milk deliveries -- are matched with those of carefree playfulness, most notably, delighted children sleigh-riding. Cabin villages, private farms, the local general store, and a town meeting served as stages for Post's artistry. She remained fascinated by the wide spectrum of personalities she encountered. Particularly enamored of the small old mill town of Berlin, New Hampshire, Post discovered that most of the townspeople came from French, Norwegian, Swedish, or Italian backgrounds. In North Conway, New Hampshire, she was asked by "a couple of cranks who weren't too pleased" not to snap many pictures of the town meeting.¹²⁰ And finally, she listened to one farmer explain the extensive sugaring process and how the season's snow had kept him and many others from reaching their maple groves.

¹²⁰Post to Stryker, 14 March 1940. Stryker Papers.

Years later Post named the New England trip as one of her favorite assignments. Not only was it "visually exciting," but it left her nostalgic -- as a child, Post had travelled to the area frequently to visit friends and family.¹²¹ Some of her most highly-publicized prints came from the set she compiled in her brief, six-week venture in New England. Sherwood Anderson, in collaboration with Edwin Rosskam, printed twenty-five of Post's photographs in his 1940 publication, Hometown. Since he was particularly interested in Post's New England trip, Anderson mailed a detailed list of scenes he wished she would record while there. A small town jail, a birth scene, an abandoned roadhouse, and a country lawyers' gathering were but a few of his many requests.¹²² Post accommodated him as well as she could, but she ignored several of Anderson's orders. Her photographs significantly transcended the written word in Hometown. William Stott believes the photos, although "badly presented," remain outstanding in comparison to Anderson's text.¹²³ Walker Evans went a step further to criticize Anderson's words as "cheap use" of FSA photography. Evans described an example in which a Post image was accompanied by an adjoining caption that

¹²¹Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

¹²²Anderson to Stryker, 28 March 1940, Stryker Papers.

¹²³Stott, Documentary Expression, 233.

"degrade[d] the picture."¹²⁴ Post's photographs of a New England winter and her love affair with it needed no words - they stood alone.

In the spring of 1940, Post crisscrossed the South covering routine government assignments, some repeat affairs for Public Health, Surplus Commodities, and the FSA project areas. Travelling in a brand new convertible, Post was able to scan the American countryside even more closely, absorbing the changes and patterns. She reminisced, comparing portions of the land to what she remembered of France. Recollections of her days in Europe seemed to promote a concern Post found difficult to dispel. Several times she mentioned her uneasiness as the international scene grew darker: "War news, international and national happenings, always seem to be even worse & more terrifying to me when I'm away & don't have anyone I know to talk to about it."¹²⁵ Nightmares about the war and the "human" race, as she put it, kept Post from fully enjoying the travel for awhile. Her job was made even more difficult because people gradually became more hysterical about the war and grew suspicious, even of Post. While working on the Terrebone Project in Louisiana, she frightened a couple of Cajun children who ran away screaming to their father that

¹²⁴Evans in conversation; Stott, Documentary Expression, 232-233.

¹²⁵Post to Stryker, 15 May 1940, Stryker Papers.

they had seen a German spy with a machine gun (her camera). On several occasions state officials and policemen stopped her to check identification. Unable to ease authorities' suspicions, Post found herself in a number of county sheriff's offices. She hated to waste time on the long, drawn-out security procedures, but she concluded that the officers probably had nothing else to keep them busy.¹²⁶

Of her assigned trip to Kentucky, Post remembered, "I was quite amazed at the backwardness of the Kentucky mountain country when I saw that for the first time.... I hadn't realized that it was still this way in this country, in the U.S."¹²⁷ As the FSA photographer responsible for the majority of Kentucky scenes, Post took more than 7,000 photographs there during the summer and autumn of 1940. Aside from conducting a brief session with Public Health officials in Louisville, she spent most of her time in the Appalachian region. The pictorial record Post produced illuminated the lives of Kentuckians, particularly those who, tucked away in the mountains, kept few written records and remained a mystery to the rest of the country.¹²⁸ Post

¹²⁶Post to Stryker, 29 July 1940, Stryker Papers.

¹²⁷Post Wolcott-Doud interview.

¹²⁸"Things As They Were: FSA Photographers in Kentucky, 1935-1943," a guidebook to the photograph exhibit, 6 September to 9 November 1985, University of Louisville Photographic Archives. Fifty-five of the seventy-seven photographs in the exhibit were taken by Marion Post; also, Beverly W. Brannan and David Horvath, eds., A Kentucky Album: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1935-1943

received a limited amount of preparatory material before entering the world of Kentucky mountain natives. She had read only the WPA Guidebook to Kentucky and Mike Ross' Machine Age in the Hills, but she was fortunate to have found the Louisville Courier-Journal staff helpful in lending suggestions and showing routes to her. Post left the newspaper office impressed by the "superior" job they did running a paper, but more elated that one employee had repaired the shutter on her Speed Graphic.¹²⁹

While in the Appalachian region, Post used her time scrupulously and never failed to carry her camera everywhere she went. She attended county fairs and horse shows, church suppers and farm auctions, an American Legion fish fry and a creek baptizing ceremony. She begged Stryker to allow her to stay even longer than her assigned time in September so that she could record the sorghum molasses "stir-offs," community apple peelings, and bean stringings.¹³⁰ Included in her vast collection are scenes of children walking to school, families burying their dead, and women carrying heavy loads of weekly supplies up creek beds.

Away from telephones and Western Union offices, Post unleashed her creative spirit. She travelled several days through a remote area of the region with a school

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

¹²⁹Post to Stryker, 29 July 1940, Stryker Papers.

¹³⁰Post to Stryker, 9 September 1940, Stryker Papers.

superintendent, Marie Turner, who served as her guide. The first day out the two got their borrowed car stuck in a mountain stream bed and had to be pulled out by a mule. A bit further up in the mountains they were stopped with a flat tire. She told Stryker of their successful attempt to repair the flat:

Tore down a fence post & while our driver (a young kid who is the son of the school janitor) tried to prop the car up I was down on my belly in the creek bed piling rocks under it. But we finally got it fixed.... We did amazingly well over the worst & most dangerous roads & creek beds I've ever seen. Got a long way with it.131

The two women once travelled by mule and were relieved when their transport was upgraded to horses on a tiny mountain trail. Post spoke excitedly of the tour:

It is wonderful country & the people are so simple & direct & kind if they know you, or if you're with a friend of theirs. I got some excellent school pictures I think, & some other things as we went along. It takes a great deal of time just to get anywhere & make friends....

Got arrested the other day in a town in the next county, even after all kinds of precautions & after having gone to the F.S.A. office & walked all over town with the F.S.A. people too. But there's a feud there between F.S.A. & Triple A, & that's where it all started. They just took me before this county judge who asked questions & looked at identification, etc. -- it was just funny because the whole town was full of people (Labor Day) & got all stirred up over it & followed me in a big procession to the court house -- all crowding around the judge afterwards to see

131Ibid.

my papers & getting into arguments about
spies....132

The case ended quickly. The judge charged Post with being a suspicious person but dismissed the case and concluded that she was probably "as good an American as anybody."¹³³

Stryker realized Post's work in Kentucky was invaluable, her official contacts important, and her scenes priceless. He told her that the stories she could tell of her experience in the Kentucky mountains would comprise an entire chapter of the book he wanted the FSA staff to write some day, adding "with your contacts down in them thar hills, we should be able to bring out good gold."¹³⁴

The Kentucky assignment finished, Post assumed a more structured shooting schedule. She travelled to Chapel Hill, where she got caught in the swarming activity of a new fall semester at the university. Since students had taken most of the rooms in Chapel Hill and in Durham, Post could not find a place to live. Even the extra rooms were unavailable to her -- those were saved for guests and girlfriends who came in droves for football weekends. Post suggested that Stryker devise an alternate plan for her. He sent her to Virginia to cover a few counties that the Chapel Hill circle

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Brownell, "Girl Photographer for FSA Travels 50,000 Miles."

¹³⁴Stryker to Post, 21 September 1940, Stryker Papers.

seemed interested to have photographed for publication. As she began to feel the pains of her long term in the field, Post grew restless:

Now tomorrow I'd like to wake up in the morning & say -- today I can go where I damn please, I don't have to let F.S.A. & Stryker know where I am, I don't have to go to Western Union or the post office or the railway express, or feel guilty because I haven't done my travel report & can't find the notebook that has the mileages of the first half of the month in it.¹³⁵

In particular, Post expressed discontent with the location, noting that she had gotten a "temporary 'belly full' of the dear old South."¹³⁶

In mid-November Post took the opportunity to return for a few days to Washington, where she began lobbying for vacation time. She pleaded that she had not had a real vacation in three years. Unable to oblige her just yet, Stryker sent Post back into the field for December and January. For a third time Post's assignments took her south -- it would be her last trip to the region as an FSA photographer. After eight weeks of frustration -- rainy Florida weather, a slow New Orleans job, an entire set of blank negatives -- Post received approval for the long-awaited vacation. She headed north to the mountains of

¹³⁵Post to Stryker, 2 October 1940, Stryker Papers.

¹³⁶Ibid.

Vermont, where she relaxed on the ski slopes.¹³⁷ Ample time off prepared Post to return to Washington refreshed and ready for new field assignments. This time Stryker chose not to arrange a schedule filled with excessive travel connections, FSA regional meetings, and deadlines. He did not want his faithful photographer fatigued before her wedding day.

In June, 1941, Marion Post married Lee Wolcott, an assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture in Washington. She had met him just months before at a friend's house in Virginia, and years later claimed that she and Wolcott "really didn't know each other" when they got married.¹³⁸ After the wedding, the two spent a few weeks close to Washington, but Marion Post Wolcott resumed her full-time duty with the FSA in July. Having never travelled west, she expressed a strong desire to journey out to the wide open spaces of the Plains. She longed to see the environment so unlike any she had ever experienced, and she told Stryker that she often heard a voice shouting in her ear, 'go west, young man.'¹³⁹ A trip to the West would in some ways round out her FSA career, bring her full circle, since she had

¹³⁷Post to Stryker, 14 March 1941; Post to Stryker, 8 April 1941, Stryker Papers.

¹³⁸Wolcott, quoted in Paul Hendrickson, "Double Exposure," The Washington Post Magazine (31 January 1988), 18.

¹³⁹Post to Stryker, 2 October 1940, Stryker Papers.

been in every other region of the United States. Ironically, Post Wolcott's "frontier" journey was her last assignment for the FSA.

Stryker wanted to insure that Post Wolcott was thoroughly prepared for her trip west. Before she departed, he suggested that she read some introductory material. He gave her a two-page bibliography that included Walter Prescott Webb's The Great Plains, Everett Dick's The Sod-House Frontier, Mari Sandoz's Old Jules, O. E. Roelvaag's Giants in the Earth, Hamlin Garland's A Son of the Middle Border, and books by Willa Cather, Clyde Davis, Paul DeFruif, and John G. Neihardt.¹⁴⁰ Stryker also provided an exhaustive shooting script that Post Wolcott could follow if she chose. Once on the trek, Post Wolcott found the variations in terrain fascinating. Overwhelmed by miles and miles of wheat in the flatlands, she wrote to Stryker, "I never imagined such expanses."¹⁴¹ While journeying through the region she followed Stryker's shooting script closely, attempting to capture the feeling of "space and distance and solitude."¹⁴² She noted that the trains stretching across the Plains looked like tiny toys,

¹⁴⁰Bill Ganzel, Dust Bowl Descent (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 8.

¹⁴¹Post Wolcott to Stryker, 22 August 1941, Stryker Papers.

¹⁴²Ibid.

and she wondered aloud if the inhabitants ever got tired of such flat, boundless distances.

While she resided at Brewster-Arnold Ranch in Birney, Montana, Post Wolcott concentrated on scenes of life on a dude ranch. Careful not to duplicate Rothstein's photographs of cattle ranches, she lent her own unique style to the horse and cattle photo stories she compiled. She remained awed by the vastness of the land on which the animals roamed, and her photographs revealed her reverence. Through careful concentration Post Wolcott made her own discoveries about the West and finally had satisfied her longing for a 'frontier' adventure. The Western trek changed her. She had experienced tremendous loneliness on the trip, and realized through the course of it that her loyalties had divided. Her correspondence to Stryker fell off considerably. She resorted to sending most of her messages by brief telegram, a surprising departure from the humorous, detailed letters she had always written. She found herself unable to concentrate as intensely on FSA duties as she had in the past. A combination of factors led her to resign her position as an FSA photographer.

The international situation frightened Post Wolcott, who wished to be back within the safe confines of home. She wrote in August, 1941:

[I] keep reading in the paper that we may be getting closer, very rapidly, to the kind of world system that may drastically, & perhaps

tragically & seriously, change our whole lives. There seems so little time left to even try to really live, relatively normally.¹⁴³

She missed her husband, who had joined her briefly on the western tour but had returned to Washington to resume his duties with the Agriculture Department. In addition, Post Wolcott grew anxious about the shift in objectives at the FSA office. By 1941, she and other FSA photographers received more assignments dealing with American war efforts, and they experienced the tighter restrictions placed on the agency. Subjects dealing with defense, including war preparations and defense housing, demanded priority but seemed particularly unappealing to Post Wolcott.¹⁴⁴ She had witnessed political turmoil in Europe and was uncertain about the potential course the United States might follow in international politics. By year's end Post Wolcott had decided to end her stint with the FSA. She was two months pregnant and realized that she could not maintain the pace, the long hours, rapid travel connections, and risks that accompanied every FSA photographer's job. Post Wolcott's scrupulous timing took her out of the FSA just months before the agency fell under control of the Office of War

¹⁴³Post Wolcott to Stryker, 22 August 1941, Stryker Papers.

¹⁴⁴One of her last series of photographs, taken in the fall of 1941, centered around a weapons display in Washington, D.C. Post Wolcott captured the wide-eyed excitement and curiosity of young boy scouts examining the various pieces.

Information. Her last letter to Stryker differed from all the others written in her three and a half years with the FSA. The familiar handwriting replaced by typescript, the casual conversation turned formal, it read:

Dear Mr. Stryker,

I hereby tender my resignation as Principal Photographer in the Historical Section, Division of Information, Farm Security Administration, effective at the close of the business day, February 21.

Sincerely yours,

Marion Post Wolcott 145

Her travels had taken her from the Maine coast to Miami Beach, from the South Carolina lowlands to the Louisiana swamplands, from the Appalachians to the Rockies, and practically every place in between. She had stood in fields of wheat and cotton and corn, between rows of tobacco and tomatoes and peas, and under trees bearing oranges and others leaking maple sap. Most importantly, she had captured thousands of images of Americans working together, playing together, and simply enjoying each other, even in the midst of economic devastation. Her pictures most stunningly portrayed the essence of an era guided by the simple precept, "Not I but we; not mine or theirs but ours."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵Post Wolcott to Stryker, 20 February 1942, Stryker Papers.

¹⁴⁶Malcolm Cowley, "The 1930s: Faith and Works." in And I Worked At the Writer's Trade: Chapters of Literary History, 1918-1978 (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 101.

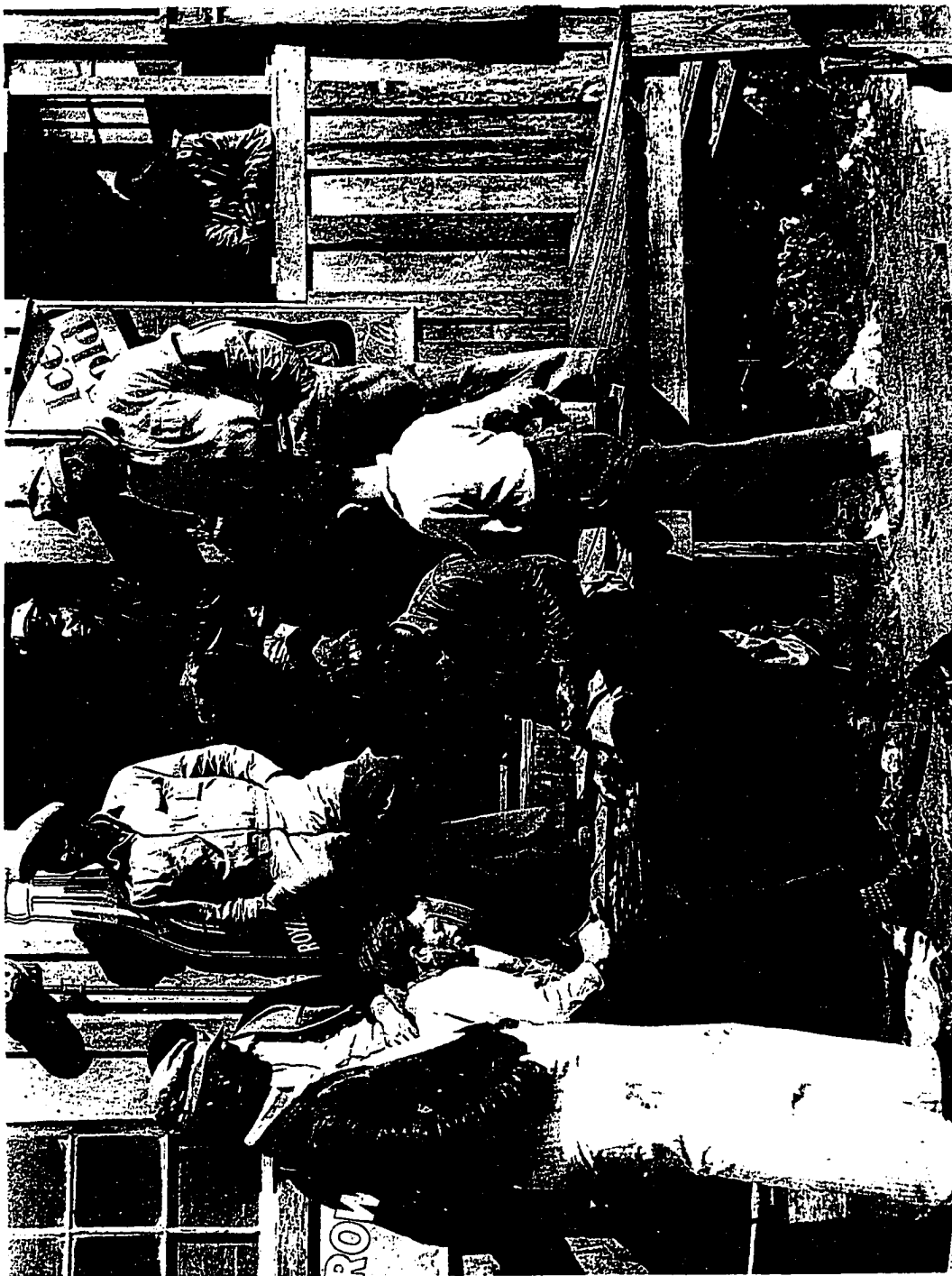
Just as she had joined the FSA at a critical time, Post Wolcott left the agency as it shifted its objectives once again. War would touch everyone and change America yet again. The camera eye would turn from domestic interests to foreign battle fronts. The intense search for America would cease, and the emphasis on collectives and causes and group affiliations would be pushed into the background, only to be resurrected under different guises years later in the unsavory atmosphere of postwar hysteria.

AN ESSAY IN PHOTOGRAPHS





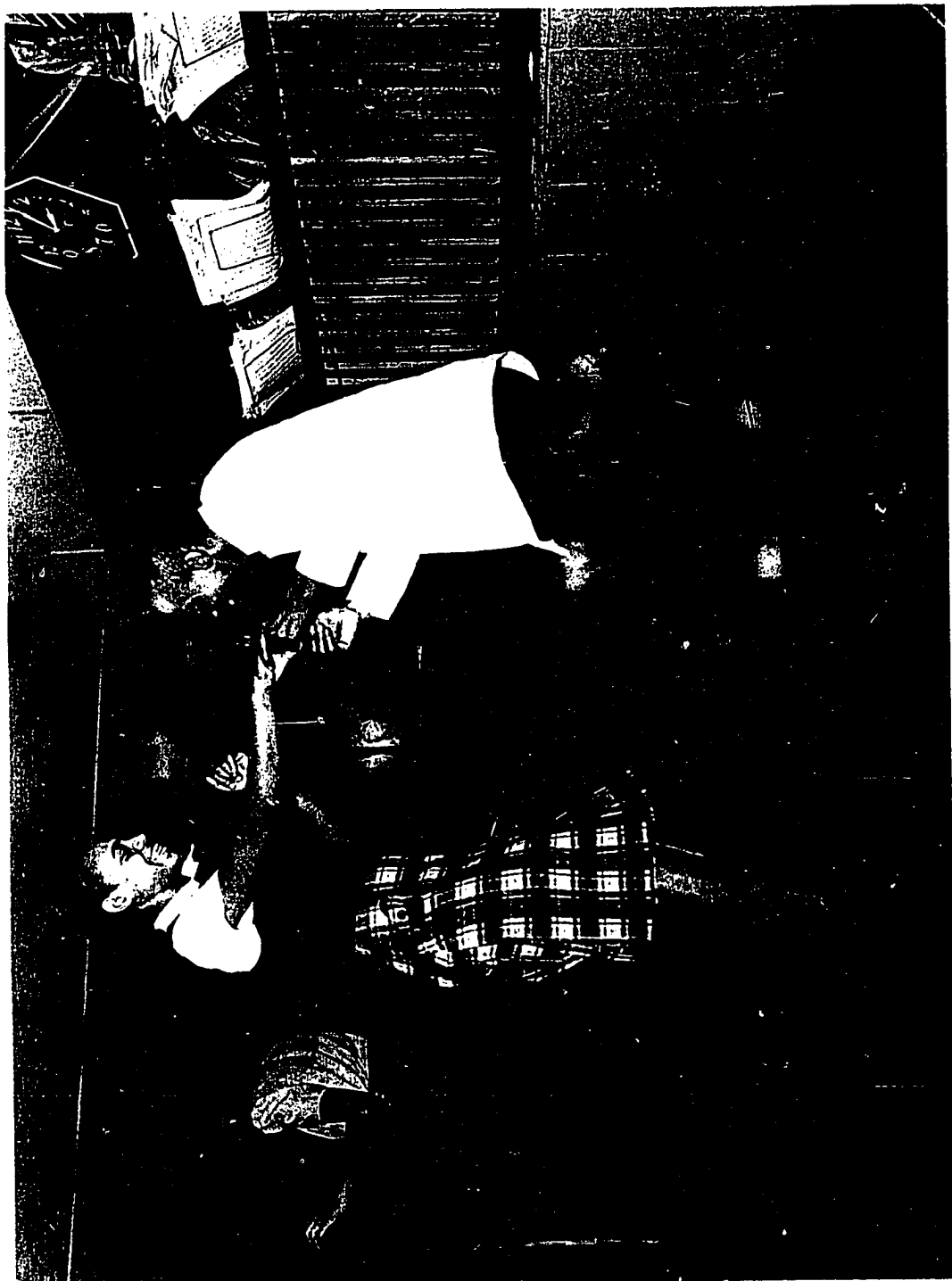


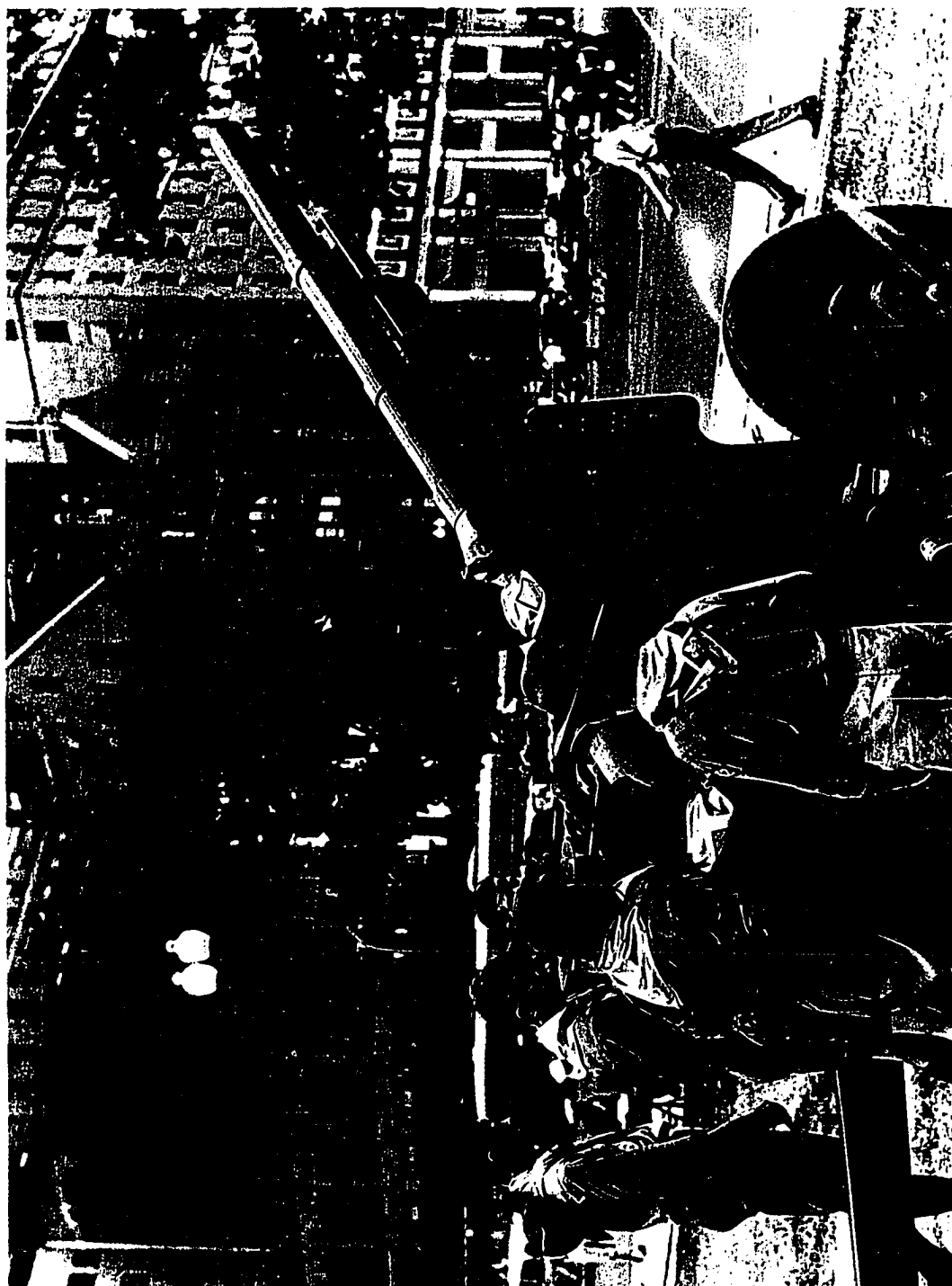












EPILOGUE

Doris Ulmann

Ulmann died before Lange or Abbott became U.S. Government employees, before Life magazine published a Bourke-White photograph on its first cover, and before Post ever picked up a camera. Her death initiated much controversy, as her brother-in-law, Henry Necarsulmer, and John Jacob Niles argued over the validity of her will (which she radically changed a few days before she died). For years, her bequest to Berea College for an art gallery was the subject of heated debate. Niles and Allen Eaton bore the responsibility of printing hundreds of undeveloped negatives from the last trip Ulmann made to the Appalachians. These were housed in the library at Columbia University until Eaton arranged to have them sent to his alma mater, the University of Oregon.

Dorothea Lange

Lange continued her career in photography after she left the FSA. Her collaborative work with husband Paul Taylor, An American Exodus, received critical acclaim, but it never appealed to the general public as much as Bourke-White and Caldwell's book, You Have Seen Their Faces. During World War II, Lange stayed in the states and photographed what she believed represented an American tragedy, the relocation camps for Japanese-Americans. A few years later, she travelled to the British Isles to take

pictures, and there and elsewhere she continued to focus upon the individual as subject. Not until her grandchildren were born did she feel comfortable delving into the relationships between family members and photographing them. She continued to discuss the excitement of living a "visual life" even during the years she fought cancer. Lange died in 1965.

Margaret Bourke-White

Bourke-White stayed in Europe throughout much of World War II, during which time she accompanied numerous air missions and sent back fabulous aerial views. The war arena offered yet another kind of adventure for her. Present at the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp, she gave the world some of its first pictures of Nazi atrocities in her photographs of the survivors. In the years following the war, she travelled all over the world, taking pictures of South African miners, Korean soldiers, and Indian cloth weavers. One of her last series of photographs reveals a contemplative Gandhi, sitting in muted shadows. Bourke-White spent over a decade fighting Parkinson's Disease and finally died in 1971.

Berenice Abbott

After leaving the WPA, Abbott became interested in science. She experimented with light rays, among other things, in her photography. She published numerous articles

about the role of photography in society and continued to argue for its value as a mirror of time and reality, rather than as a vehicle for copying art. After decades of trying to make Eugene Atget's work known to the public, she finally in 1964 found a publisher for his photographs. Abbott's last major photographic study focussed on the state of Maine, which she eventually claimed as home. She presently resides in her country home in Abbott Village, Maine.

Marion Post Wolcott

When Marion Post Wolcott resigned from the FSA in 1942, she retired to a farm in northern Virginia to rear a family. She put her cameras away for nearly thirty years and took only a few snapshots of her children. After living abroad with her foreign-service husband, she returned to the United States in the late 1950s. Having left the photography world, she was turned away at the door of a Washington, D.C., gallery reception honoring her former FSA colleague, Russell Lee, because no one recognized her. The doorman could not locate Lee to identify Wolcott. In the early 1970s, she decided to experiment with color film and began taking pictures of street protests in southern California. She currently lives in Santa Barbara. Only recently have gallery owners and photography critics and scholars recognized her work and her contribution to the world of photography.

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The principal source materials for this project are photographs and personal papers. A number of these collections have been pored over by scholars, whereas others have been rarely perused, much less seriously studied. The three collections of Doris Ulmann's work are virtually all that is available on this little-known New York native who compiled a comprehensive collection on Appalachian life in the 1920s and 1930s. A complete set of Ulmann prints may be seen only in the University of Oregon's Special Collections. Of the 10,000 prints, approximately 2500 original negatives exist, from which prints may be made. None of the Ulmann material is available on microfilm or microfiche, and, because of its rare nature, it may not be loaned. A good deal of the Ulmann archival material has remained untouched and unseen by scholars and the general public.

Although Dorothea Lange has been a more popular subject for study, the collection in her name at The Oakland Museum has rarely been searched by historians. My particular focus on Lange deals with her early portraiture work in the 1920s and its influence on her later photography as an employee of the U.S. Government in the 1930s. Most of Lange's early photography has been neglected in favor of her later and more famous pictures. The majority of the sources in the Lange Collection are unavailable elsewhere. All of her proof books, some field notes, and her records of portrait jobs reside in this collection. I was able to study a

recent addition to the Dorothea Lange Collection, a several-hundred page transcript of interview notes taken just a few months before Lange died.

The Margaret Bourke-White Papers and Prints in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University are open solely to scholars. Permission is needed to use any information or visual evidence taken from this collection. None is in the public domain, though Bourke-White's photographs may be studied in any of the numerous periodicals to which she contributed, including the Luce publications, Life and Fortune.

The most easily accessible source materials for this project include the Farm Security Administration--Office of War Information photographs and written records (separate lots in the Library of Congress). These records are in the public domain. In addition, some 80,000 of the 272,000 photos attributed to the FSA-OWI are available on microfilm or microfiche and may be bought or borrowed. The entire body of written records is also available on microfilm. A major supplement to the FSA-OWI records is the University of Louisville's Roy Stryker Collection. Roy Stryker, head of the FSA Historical Section/Photography Unit, gave these personal papers, letters, office scrapbooks, and clippings to the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, whose staff edited and microfilmed a major portion of the records.

The Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art

provides transcripts of all the interviews Richard Doud conducted in the 1960s with the FSA photographers. His interview of Marion Post Wolcott has proved especially valuable, because she explains the individual and group politics behind FSA photography in the late 1930s. The papers of Marchal E. Landgren, Berenice Abbott's friend and confidant for many years must be viewed in the Archives. In addition, the undated Berenice Abbott interview conducted by Arnold Crane is a restricted access document, available for study only with written permission from Miss Abbott.

Record Group 69, the vast collection of Work Progress Administration records in the National Archives, contains all of the written records regarding Abbott's employment with the WPA and her "Changing New York" project. However, they are scattered among various groups of division records, which have to be individually searched. All photographs from the "Changing New York" project, though taken under the auspices of the federal government, are housed in the Museum of the City of New York. A substantial number have been published in various books and exhibit catalogs about Abbott's work. Other pictures taken by New York City WPA photographers remain in the Still Pictures Branch at the National Archives.

Although some of this information is available to the general public, it was necessary for me to study each of these collections in its entirety. The strength of my

argument centers around photographic series, or whole jobs, completed by these women. Isolated images reproduced in magazines or books do not reveal the historical significance of visual imagery in the 1920s and 1930s. Instead, the fifteen, twenty, or thirty photographs of one person, one family, or one community better show the nature of American character and culture in these decades. Therefore, all of the photographs in these collections -- some devoid of aesthetic beauty, others lacking technical perfection, -- had to be considered as evidence. A small portion of this dissertation is based on photographs that cannot be reproduced, either because no negative exists, the negative is too fragile, or certain restrictions apply. In this case, the sources remain in relative obscurity, but are especially valuable, since only a few curious researchers will have the opportunity to view and to evaluate them.

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APPENDIX

USING PHOTOGRAPHS AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

"The camera record is the least abstract of all recorded information."

-- John Collier

In a Friday morning session of the 54th annual meeting of the American Historical Association (1939), four speakers were slated to survey "Some Neglected Sources of Social History."¹ The program committee had chosen Roy Stryker, the driving force behind the FSA Historical Section, to discuss photography. In his discourse Stryker emphasized the multitude of resources that modern photography provided for the social historian. He further noted that the historian should realize the importance of utilizing these resources, since his public was being conditioned by the picture magazine, the rotogravure, and the newsreel. He challenged historians not only to recognize photography, but also to aid in processing the mounting accumulation of photographic evidence -- the "potent raw material from which to compound new histories and make old ones more vivid."²

¹American Historical Association, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1939 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941).

²Roy Stryker and Paul Johnstone, "Documentary Photography," in The Cultural Approach to History, ed. Caroline F. Ware (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940). This chapter is based upon Stryker's speech at the 54th annual AHA Convention held in Washington, December 1939.

Nearly fifty years later the Southern Historical Association scheduled at its annual meeting a session entitled, "Documentary Photography in the Rural South." Discussion centered around the use of photographs as legitimate historical sources. Photographic historian F. Jack Hurley contended that even the admitted bias of FSA photographs (one of the most widely-used sets of pictures), did not make them less valuable to historians.³ Just as Stryker had pointed out in 1939, photography can be distorted, as can history. The photographer who selected his subject and camera angle works upon the same bias as does the historian who chooses his topic, his angle of approach, and his materials.⁴ For example, Stryker's entourage of photographers consciously omitted particular portions of history in their collective enterprise. In answering the question, "Was it history?", the FSA mentor explained:

Of course. At least it was a slice of history.... But you'll find no record of big people or big events in the collection. There are pictures that say labor and pictures that say capital and pictures that say Depression...not a single shot of Wall Street, and absolutely no celebrities.⁵

³F. Jack Hurley, "Shooting for the File: The Farm Security Photographers in the South, 1935-1943," Paper presented at the 50th annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, Louisville, October 1985.

⁴Ware, The Cultural Approach, 327.

⁵Stryker and Wood, In This Proud Land, 8.

In a perceptive essay Thomas Schlereth notes historians' reluctant acceptance of photographs as vital historical evidence. He says that as "students of the word," most academicians tend to rely heavily upon verbal analysis and to see visual data as a threat to printed communication sources. Schlereth equates the limitations of photographic evidence with the drawbacks of any other source -- all have the potential to misrepresent reality.⁶ The same idea is echoed by Michael Lesy, whose innovative use of photograph collections has brought him both recognition and criticism.⁷ He contends that a photograph is a cultural artifact, like a letter or a poem, and that each of these must be interpreted, deciphered, or viewed in the same manner. Each piece of evidence serves as an end in itself or is created to achieve an end. Lesy explains:

In either case, it is tangled within a whole culture that is itself pinned within a social structure, both of which enclose and are enclosed by the projections and perceptions of the mind. To comprehend a photograph is to open a set of Chinese boxes only to discover a

⁶Thomas J. Schlereth, Artifacts and the American Past (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1980). Chapter one, entitled "Mirrors of the Past: Historical Photography and American History," is a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

⁷Michael Lesy's works include Bearing Witness: A Photographic Chronicle of American Life, 1860-1945 (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Real Life: Louisville in the Twenties (New York: Pantheon, 1976); and Wisconsin Death Trip (New York: Pantheon, 1973).

message that must be translated from one language to another. It's a tricky business.⁸

Just as an historian strives to achieve a working method for interpreting verbal material, he must also construct a reliable framework for evaluating visual evidence. James Borchert, who believes photographs are necessary to supplement and balance the printed word and statistical data, suggests that researchers "cast as wide a net as possible."⁹ He maintains that the researcher, particularly one unfamiliar with photographic interpretation, will be able to more easily determine "bias" if a large number of pictures is examined. The virtue of quantity also provides clues as to what surrounding evidence a photographer may have purposefully left out.

Perhaps the most difficult task in decoding meaning from pictures lies in understanding photographic vision. Photographers work within the constraints of technology -- each uses a certain type of film or lens or paper. They employ an optical system which alone has no selective process. In comparing the camera to other scientific instruments, James Agee has said it is "incapable of

⁸Michael Lesy to Marsha Peters in "'Doing the Rest': The Uses of Photographs in American Studies," American Quarterly 29 (Bibliography issue, 1977).

⁹James Borchert, "Historical Photo-analysis: A Research Method," Historical Methods 15 (Spring 1982): 35-44.

recording anything but absolute, dry truth."¹⁰ However, the person standing behind the camera, the real 'eye' of the camera eye, renders his subjectivity, thus prejudicing any photographic record. As Paul Byers has stated, "Cameras Don't Take Pictures," leaving the reader to fill in the implied: "People Do."¹¹ Photographers respond to the humanness that confront them. As individuals, each perceives the world a bit differently, and their respective photographs reflect these feelings. Marsha Peters, in her discussion on using photographs, suggests the same, then compares the FSA work of Walker Evans and Russell Lee:

The images recorded by Walker Evans, for example, seem to reflect a desire for order, stability, and simplicity. In contrast, Russell Lee's photographs communicate an interest in change, diversity, and unexpected juxtapositions.¹²

John Collier, a former FSA photographer and lifetime social scientist, notes the connections made between photographer and subject at the time an image is being recorded. He compares this connection to the communication made during an interview, what he terms the "two-way bridge of human

¹⁰James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941).

¹¹Paul Byers, "Cameras Don't Take Pictures," Columbia University Forum 9 (1966): 27-31.

¹²Peters and Mergen, "'Doing the Rest,'" 293.

relations."¹³ John Whiting, in Photography Is A Language, argues that the camera is a tool of communication in need of a photographer capable of perceptive visual thinking. Photographers cannot simply point their cameras and shoot. They must transmit visual thinking to the camera operations in order to obtain the desired effect.¹⁴

The photographic historian's task, then, is to interpret the visual thinking of the photographer. Thomas Schlereth suggests that the historians attempt to "get inside the mind of the photographer."¹⁵ The attempt may uncover new evidence or reveal unexpected intentions or raise fresh questions. Among the many sources historians consult to mold their own perception about the human past, photographs should hold an important place. For in the end, photography and history exhibit more similarities than differences. As Schlereth concludes:

Photography and history, while seemingly sharing a common objectivity in interpreting the past, turn out to be similar provocateurs in portraying the ambiguity and obscurity of the past human experience.¹⁶

¹³John Collier, "Evaluating Visual Data," in Images of Information: Still Photography in the Social Sciences, ed. Jon Wagner (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979): 161-169.

¹⁴John Whiting, Photography Is A Language (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing, 1946).

¹⁵Schlereth, "Mirrors of the Past," 46.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 18.

VITA

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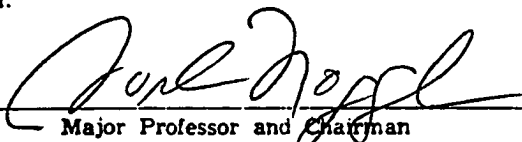
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT


Candidate: Melissa A. McEuen

Major Field: History

Title of Dissertation: Changing Eyes: American Culture and the Photographic Image,
1918-1941

Approved:

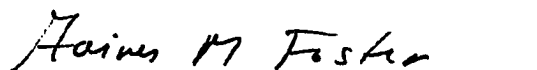

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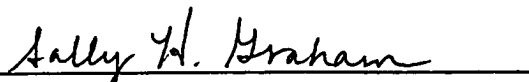

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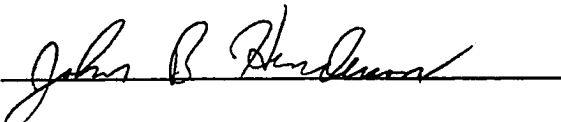
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