

Changing Family Dynamics during the Great Depression

Emily Pedersen

History 7B

Spring 2015

In Arthur Rothstein's 1936 photo, sand and damaged barbed wire covers a barren Oklahoma farm (Image 1). A farmer uses a shovel to dig a hole, while his son sits behind him crying. The Dust Bowl displaced 350,000 people from their homes in Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas, such as the farmer pictured in Rothstein's photo.¹ As seen in this photo, the Dust Bowl had devastating consequences on farm workers' lives. Families had to make the great trek from their home states to California to find work, and ultimately hoping for a better life. Due to the Dust Bowl, everyday life for migrant workers was difficult, and as a result changed family dynamics. Mothers had to work, some fathers grew ashamed of their inability to provide for the family, and children had to become wage earners. The existence of these photographs, which showed the lives of poor migrant families to the public, helped secure government relief to aid these farm workers and eventually re-stabilized gender roles.

Dorothea Lange's photograph, "Migrant Mother", exposed the strains the Great Depression left on mothers, which jolted the hearts of Americans and became the iconic image of the decade (Image 2). Around February or March of 1936 in Nipomo, California, Lange concluded a month long trip documenting the experiences of migrant farm workers and shot the iconic photo. In "Migrant Mother", Lange captures Florence Owens Thompson, the mother, who is with her children. They were poor and starving pea pickers. The focus of this photo is Thompson, a woman who was born and raised in Oklahoma. She seems concerned and anxious about the future; her eyes gaze off to the side and her eyebrows are furrowed. The composition of the photo also highlights the stress lines of Thompson's forehead, and worn look of her and her children's clothes.

¹ Finley, Harold M. "More Light on the Migrant Question," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1940, A4. Proquest Historical Newspapers (165060298).

"Migrant Mother" struck a chord with America. America empathized with the heavy responsibilities of mothers, vicariously feeling the mother's and her children pain. Lange was working for the Resettlement Administration, which was a New Deal federal agency that helped relocate struggling families and communities. Through Lange's powerful and emotionally moving photo, the need for federal intervention became clear: families were suffering and the government needed to help. The government responded by organizing relief, establishing migrant camps and other federal aid. Lange's goal was to capture this mother's story, and the public responded by sending relief to aid the poor and starving migrants.

Even though "Migrant Mother" captures the story of one mother and family, the photo expresses the pain universally felt by all migrant laborers during their trek- the challenges of an uncertain future and the inability to provide for family members. To appeal to the public for the increased need of government aid, Lange continued to document other mothers to demonstrate the extreme destitution mothers faced. In 1936 in a Kern migrant camp in California, Lange captured a photo in which six children watch and huddle around a baby who is sleeping in a cardboard box (Image 3). The cardboard box appears to have been used as a storage container for California oranges. The children surrounding the sleeping baby all have solemn and concerned expressions on their faces. The children are wearing dirty and unkempt clothes. The focus of this photo is the sleeping baby. The surrounding children's gazes bring the viewer's attention to what the children are staring at - the baby's extreme sleeping conditions in a poorly designed substitute for a crib. The caption for the photograph reads, "While the mothers are working in the fields, the preschool children of migrant families are cared for in the nursery school under trained teachers, Kern migrant camp, California." Before the Great Depression, women's roles were typically in the home, caring for the children, husband, and household. However during the

Great Depression, women, out of necessity to survive, shifted gears and moved into the working sphere. Mothers couldn't care for their children as they traditionally did, and instead had to put that responsibility into the hands of trained teachers. Mothers became farm laborers, leaving behind the traditional feminine sphere of maintaining the household and entering the traditionally male dominated sphere of the labor force.

Through this photo of the nursery children, Lange hoped to capture the changing mother-child dynamic - women were no longer with their children. Lange's goal was also to bring awareness to the squalor conditions of nurseries in migrant camps. At these migrant camps, some women were in the field harvesting this year's crop while unfamiliar women took care of the working mothers' children. Also, as this photo suggests, children looked after other children. In a *Los Angeles Times* article published in 1940, Prof. Taylor of University of California says that migrant families' children could only get "limited schooling in place after place."² Traditionally middle to upper class women would focus on their children receiving high-quality education. However during the Great Depression, women couldn't focus all their efforts on raising their child; they had to focus on surviving. Women gradually grew resentful of their children because having more children meant needing to earn more wages and harvesting more food for the family to survive. Women also could not ensure that the living conditions of their children were sanitary while they worked. Lange emphasizes the extreme and poor conditions of migrant camp nurseries, again hoping to mobilize America to aid the needy.

Not only did relations between mothers and children change, but also the strains of everyday life caused spouses to grow apart. Russell Lee's photo, taken in 1939 in a camp near Sebastian, Texas, captures the evolving relationship between married couples (Image 4). In the

² Ibid.

photograph, a migrant husband and wife sit across from each other in a tent. The wife and husband show no affection towards one another, and no emotions on their faces, tired from a day's work in the field. The viewer's eyes are brought to the empty space between them. By capturing the space that physically separates the two, Lee shows the emotional separation and distance between husband and wife. Having an unstable lifestyle, uncertain future, and little money burdened the tie between husband and wife. Husbands felt the extreme pressure to obtain basic necessities such as food, water, and shelter. Wives left the home to contribute to the survival of their family, while husbands felt ashamed and humiliated due to their inability to provide for their family.

In 1936, the Farm Security Administration hired Russell Lee for the photographic documentation project, capturing the consequences of the Great Depression. Lee's argument in taking this photo was to show the straining effect of the Great Depression on marriage. The audience for this photo is America, and specifically married couples. Through this photo, Lee hopes to show that factors such as anxiety about the future and growing discontent with life were universal amongst married people- most couples fell on hard times. Through documenting this changing relationship and bringing it to the public's attention, Lee's work spurred the government to offer federal aid, potentially saving marriages and relationships.

However, some husbands, incapacitated by their loss of "breadwinner status", felt their masculinity threatened and refused government aid. According to a *Los Angeles Times* article published on July 24, 1938, some migrant workers participated in a labor strike and refused government aid. State Relief Administrator, Harold E. Pomeroy, said about the male migrant workers, "They say they want us to be neutral, but they really want us to be neutral on their side

and support their strike. I'll be damned if I'll do it."³ These migrant workers did not want the government's money or camps, but for the government to offer solidarity- something the state relief administrator did not want to provide.

In another one of Russell Lee's photos, Lee highlights male migrant workers' declining perception of their masculinity. In February of 1939 near a migrant camp in Edinburg, Texas, Lee captured a photo in which two men are standing by a car (Image 5). The focus of this image is the interaction, or lack of interaction, between the two men. According to the caption, the two men were aware that a photo was being taken. Their poses are stiff and unnatural. The man on the left seems unhappy and scrunches his face up, while the man on the right has a blank expression on his face. They are not talking, but resting in the same area. These male migrant workers didn't want help because they did not want to look powerless or un-masculine. According to the caption of the photograph, the men claimed that they were not migrants, even though it was clear they were migrant day labor by the condition of their tents and attire. They also expressed themselves as needing nothing and not desiring governmental aid. Although not explicitly said in the caption, these men were mostly likely married. These men were ashamed by the name "migrant laborers" because the title meant an inability to adequately provide for their family, and hence a blow to their masculinity. To counteract their loss of masculinity, men refused government aid. Men did not want to look vulnerable and refusing government aid made men feel more "manly."

Through this photo, Lee argues that the Great Depression shattered the traditional concept of masculinity by challenging men's pre-conceived notions about men's self-worth as husbands. Lee's intended audience is the male migrant worker labor force. In the caption, the

³ "State Relief Head Fights Cash Aid for Strikers," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1938, 16. Proquest Historical Newspapers (164840193).

men expressed hesitancy about being photographed, but "agreed to having the pictures made since they felt that there were other people that might be helped in that way." Through distributing this photo, Lee aimed to show the male work force that they were not alone- that other men were facing the same struggle for their manhood.

However, some men, who could not take the pressures of family life, abandoned their families. Captured in June of 1936 in California, Lange depicts a struggling family without a father (Image 6). In the photo, the family parked the car along the road and sat in the grass. The car has packages strapped to the rear and roof. The bottom of the car has a compartment, which holds a spare tire and other personal belongings. The three half-grown children are not playing with each other, but sitting separately staring off into the distance. According to the caption, the mother still had faith despite the obstacles she and her family endured. She believed that people must work hard, and "have faith in the soil", to succeed.

Through this photo, Lange shows that even though the father abandoned this family, the mother did not give up hope. While men and husbands felt humiliated and ashamed, women found their status increased by their new roles as laborers. Women had no choice but to work to support family. Lange highlighted this phenomenon by showing America the strength and perseverance of women, garnering support for government reforms in migratory labor.

During the Great Depression, many children could no longer enjoy the traditional simplicity of childhood. Instead children became migrant laborers to support the family. In August of 1939 in Yakima Valley, Washington, Lange photographed a young migratory worker (Image 7). The boy is in a field and is in the center of the photo, pictured from the waist up. He wears a wrinkled collar shirt under his overalls. Dirt splotches cover his face. He has heavy, dark bags under his eyes. His face is expressionless with a hollow look in his eyes. According to the

caption, the boy came to Yakima Valley for three years in a row to pick hops, signifying the boy's dedicated work ethic and dire need to work. His mother told the photographer, "You'd be surprised what that boy can pick." The caption suggests that the boy's mother is aware of his competition- that other migrant boys can also harvest crop. The mother knows that he has to gather enough hops to either eat or sell so that his family can survive.

Through this photo, Lange showed the exhausting effects of the Great Depression on children. Children had to make money by picking berries, harvesting crops, or cotton. Children did not have the time to enjoy childhood and family life. Instead, they had adult worries and responsibilities, such as caring for their parents, siblings, and themselves. Again, Lange's audience is the American public. She hoped to show the public devastating toll of the Great Depression on children- that children became physically and emotionally drained to survive. The public took notice. According to *Los Angeles Times* article written in August 1939, President Roosevelt urged Congress to enact legislation to set minimum age standards for workers.⁴ Lange's photography brought attention to crises happening in the nation, provoking the government to act.

Even though shifting family roles produced strains on familial ties, many families made the trek to California in search of a better life. In a *Los Angeles Times* article, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) claimed that the government used 135 million dollars to keep laborers in their home states, while the government only used 6 million in California for migrant assistance.⁵ The FSA knew that Californians were hesitant about the influx of the migrant worker force, but hoped to change Californian's attitudes by demonstrating that it cost more money to keep

⁴ "Child Labor Law Sought for Sea," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1939, A. Proquest Historical Newspapers (165010059).

⁵ "Cost to Anchor Migrants Gains: More Spent to Keep Destitute Away From California, F.S.A. Says," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1940, 5. Proquest Historical Newspapers (164997171).

migrants away than in California. In the image "Come to California" taken in November of 1935 near Bakersfield, California, Lange photographed a wagon full of Texan refugees' worldly possessions, supporting the idea of assisting migrant workers to come to California (Image 8). Although the refugees are not pictured, the photo captures the perseverance of the refugees. The migrant workers believed that California could offer opportunities unthinkable in Texas, bringing all their belongings and hoping that relocating can provide relief and stability to the family. Lange's goal of her photo was to humanize the refugees' story. Through her photo, Lange shows the public, and more specifically Californians, that these refugees have almost nothing as their worldly possessions and that Californians should support the migrants' move to California.

Although the migrants' move to California was difficult, they did not mind enduring these extreme conditions together as families. In one of Lange's photos taken in November of 1935 near Bakersfield, California, Lange captures a family struggling to survive (Image 9). According to the caption, the family has twenty-two members and is encamped without shelter and water, looking for work in cotton fields. The family members look worn out, tired from a day's journey and concerned for the future. However, this family made it to California together, despite the challenges of everyday life. Through this photo, Lange communicates the family's destitute state, hoping for America to see the poor living conditions of migrant workers and galvanize the government into action to support families.

In response to the growing number of penniless and homeless refugees, the Farm Security Administration established migrant camps to aid needy families. According to *Los Angeles Times* published in 1940, the House designated 5 million dollars to fund FSA's efforts to create

the migrant camps.⁶ In one of Lange's photo taken in 1939 near Imperial Valley, California, Lange documents the FSA's migrant camps (Image 10). In the caption of the photo, Lange claims that the camps are much improved due to the FSA migrant camp program. However, in the photo, the camps look bare. No people are picture in the photo, just a long row of tents along a dry ditch bank. Although Lange's goal is to promote the work of the FSA, her photo also shows that FSA brought about change by providing shelters for struggling families- even if the shelter has just the bare minimum.

The Great Depression changed the family dynamic in many ways. Mothers entered the traditionally male-dominated labor force to support their families, husbands and fathers grew distance and rebellious due to their loss of status as the primary breadwinners, and children became wage earners and faced adult challenges as laborers. The FSA's documentation project humanized the plight of the poor. Their work captured the tortured essence of the migrant worker existence, and allowed America to vicariously experience the workers' challenges. By reporting on the issues of the poor, the photographers not only tugged at the heartstrings of America but also spurred government intervention. In the 1930s, family structure was volatile, shifting due to the extenuating circumstance of financial instability. However, with government aid, and America's involvement in World War Two in the 1940s, the traditional nuclear family structure re-emerged as America needed stability after a decade of instability and uncertainty.

⁶ "Migrant Camp Program Aided: House Group Reporting Relief Bill Designates \$5,000,000 for Project," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1940, 11. Proquest Historical Newspapers (165072351).

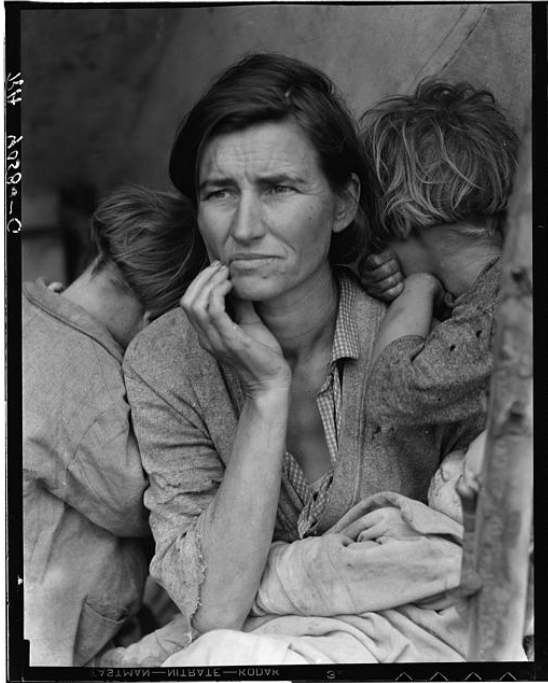
Appendix

Image 1:



Arthur Rothstein, "Dust bowl farmer raising fence to keep it from being buried under drifting sand. Cimarron County, Oklahoma," 1936, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.31916/>

Image 2:



Dorothea Lange, "Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California," 1936, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8b29516>.

Image 3:



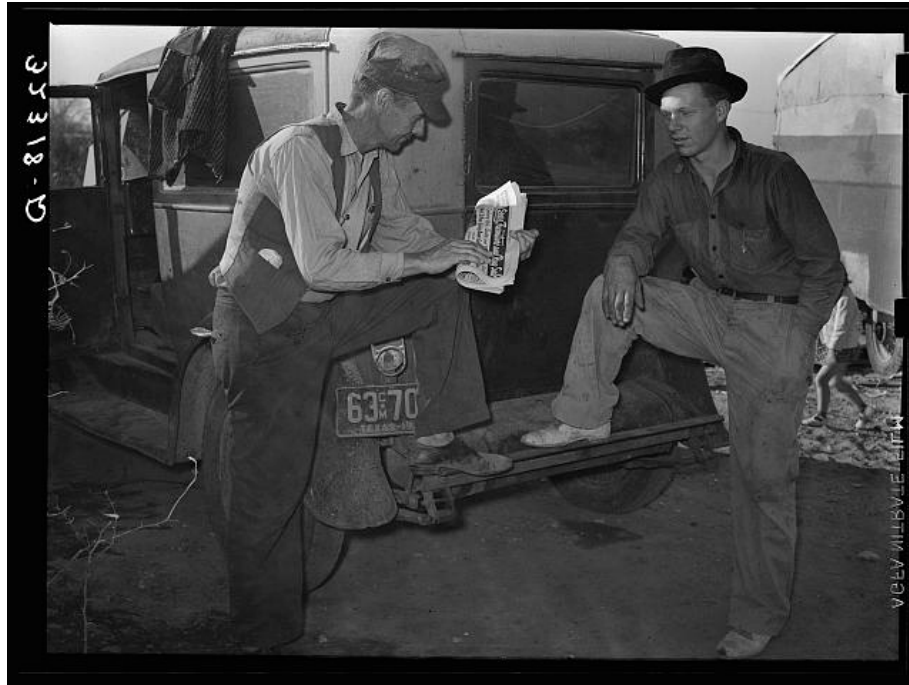
Dorothea Lange, "While the mothers are working in the fields, the preschool children of migrant families are cared for in the nursery school under trained teachers, Kern migrant camp, California," 1936, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8a31316/?co=fsa>

Image 4:



Russell Lee, "White migrant and his wife in camp near Sebastian, Texas. Both are west Texans who have come to the valley for the winter vegetable harvest," 1939, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b37322/>

Image 5:



Russell Lee, "White migrant talking in camp near Edinburg, Texas. These people claimed that they were not migrants, even though it was obvious that they were doing migrant day labor and the condition of their tents showed that they had been on the road for a long time. They expressed themselves as needing nothing and desiring no governmental aid. However they agreed to having the pictures made since they felt that there were other people that might be helped in that way," 1939, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b37326/?co=fsa>

Image 6:



Dorothea Lange, "Depression refugee family from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Arrived in California June 1936. Mother and three half-grown children; no father. "Anybody as wants to work can get by. But if a person loses their faith in the soil like so many of them back there in Oklahoma, then there ain't no hope for them. We're making it all right here, all but for the schooling, 'cause that boy of mine, he wants to go to the University," 1936, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29852/?co=fsa>

Image 7:



Dorothea Lange, " Migratory boy in squatter camp. Has come to Yakima Valley for the third year to pick hops. Mother: "You'd be surprised what that boy can pick." Washington, Yakima Valley," 1939, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b34342/>

Image 8:



Dorothea Lange, " Roadside camp near Bakersfield, California. "Come to California." The worldly possessions of refugees from Texas dust, drought and depression," 1935, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b26856/?co=fsa>

Image 9:



Dorothea Lange, "Squatters along highway near Bakersfield, California. Penniless refugees from dust bowl. Twenty-two in family, thirty-nine evictions, now encamped near Bakersfield without shelter, without water and looking for work in the cotton," 1935, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b26857/>

Image 10:



Dorothea Lange, "Grower's camp for pickers on large pea ranch along ditch bank. Growers' camps in Imperial Valley and elsewhere have been much improved this year largely because of influence of Farm Security Administration (FSA) migrant camp program. Near Calipatria, Imperial Valley, California," 1939, Photograph, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA – OWI Collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000002563/PP/>