

It is one of the most iconic images in the history of photography –

a mother, with three young children clinging to her, stared pensively into the distance, as if contemplating the tenuous future she and her family face during the worst of what came to be known as the Great Depression. "Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California" was one of hundreds of photographs that Dorothea Lange made during the 1930s, most of them while on assignment for such federal agencies as the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration, when she and fellow photographers were tasked with chronicling the impact of the Great Depression on American society. Lange's "Migrant Mother" did as much as any image to capture the human toll of those unprecedented "hard times." But what appears to be a moment out of time is in fact the result of a number of factors – some random, some deliberate – that came together to produce this image. This is one of the many stories told in "Dorothea Lange's America," now on display at Gilcrease Museum. This nationally touring exhibit includes some 30 images by Lange along with works by 11 of her contemporaries, including such well-known photographers as Walker Evans, Wright Morris, Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein. Mark Dolph, the museum's Curator of History, has augmented the exhibit with works from the Gilcrease collection that provide a much broader and richer portrait of the United States during this turbulent decade. "This has always been my favorite period of American history," Dolph said. "And I realize that sounds a little odd, to say the Great Depression is my favorite. But to me, the Great Depression was the crucible that formed the modern United States, that prepared us for World War II and to take leadership of the world." Lange was working as a portrait photographer in San Francisco when the stock market crashed on Oct. 28, 1929. "She went from dealing with the cream of San Francisco society to taking her camera out into the street to take pictures of men and women struggling to find work and food," Dolph said. One of Lange's first such images, "White Angel Bread Line, 1933," has become

almost as famous as "Migrant Mother." The Gilcrease exhibit devotes an entire wall to "Migrant Mother," with an extended text panel of Lange's recounting how the chance glimpse of sign for pea pickers led her to the camp where Thompson "an Oklahoma native" and her family were living, as well as five other images that Lange took leading up to what would become the famous image. "One of the things that I wanted to make clear is that, even if her work during this time looked like documentary photography, Dorothea Lange was always an artist," Dolph said. "This image that everyone knows didn't just happen. It was a matter of Lange going through the process an artist does to achieve his or her ends. Lange said she didn't manipulate the truth " she just kept working until she found the image that expressed the truth." The Gilcrease exhibit also includes a segment devoted to another chronicler of hard times, Woody Guthrie, as well as showings of the documentary "The Plow that Broke the Plains," which shows the devastation caused by over-farming throughout the middle of the country. A series of photographs about Oklahoma during the Depression are arranged like prints drying in a darkroom, complete with red lights. This series includes a number of famous images, many by Russell Lee, a Farm Security Administration photographer who spent a great deal of time in Oklahoma. Dolph said that the real audience for the photographs that Lange and others made during the 1930s was not the general public, but the members of the U.S. Congress. "This was, in the strictest sense, propaganda," Dolph said. "The purpose was to move popular opinion, in the most positive way, to encourage support of the programs (President Franklin D.) Roosevelt has proposed to help those in need. "We're talking about a time when 25 percent of the work force in America was unemployed," he said. "There were no social safety nets to catch people before they fell into poverty. The Great Depression affected just about everyone. And I would say that, out of all the states in the union, Oklahoma was probably the hardest hit of all. It's

economy was based on two things – oil and agriculture – and the Great

Depression wiped both of them out." James D. Watts Jr. 918-581-8478 james.watts@tulsaworld.com Twitter: watzw

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