The
Signs of
Hard Times

We were in a small town and [Russell Lee] saw a little old lady with a little knot of hair on her head. He wanted to take her picture, but the woman said, "What do you want to take my picture for?" ... He turned to her and said: "Lady, you're having a hard time and a lot of people don't think you're having such a hard time. We want to show them that you're a human being, a nice human being, but you're having troubles."

"Well," she said, "All right. You can take my picture, but I've got some friends, and I wish you would take their pictures, too. Could you come and have some lunch with me today?" We stayed all that day and that night had supper. She invited four or five women over and Russell took pictures.

- An incident in Minnesota in 1937, as recalled by Roy Stryker

"Excellent work. Enlarge the project and take more pictures. Very fine use of public funds."

"They could be better. Please save our tax money for something more useful."

"Excellent and vivid portrayal. Far better than reams of the written word. Have never witnessed more clear depiction of things as they are."
"Teach the underprivileged to have fewer children and less misery."

"If the newspapers don't print these—can you get them before the public in some other manner?"

"Every comfortable person who objects to the present Administration's efforts to help the poor in [the] city or country should be made to look at these splendid pictures until they see daylight."

"As pictures O.K. but a false impression is given of American farm conditions. Typical of the New Deal bunk at taxpayers' expense. However, F.D.R. and the whole gang is about washed up, Thank God, and a majority of Christians in the U.S.A."

"Touched me to the point where I would like to quit everything in order to help these stricken people."

"They're exceedingly lousy."

"These pictures are great. They speak a thousand words to especially enlighten people who have never seen much farm life—and do not believe such conditions can exist."

"An excellent illustration of the necessity for Social Justice . . .""

"Well, we've got a big army and navy haven't we?"

"I am two weeks in this country. I have my first papers. I am a German Civil Engineer. I hope to help. Vos mit ich kann."

— A selection of written responses from persons who saw the FSA exhibit at The International Photographic Salon, Grand Central Palace, New York, 1938
t is easy to believe, especially if one has seen some of the most famous FSA photographs—Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” and her pictures of Okies on the road, Russell Lee’s close-up of an old farm woman’s gnarled hands, and Walker Evans’s images of Alabama sharecroppers—that the FSA photographers were a band of good neighbors with cameras, who photographed poor Americans so that their fellow citizens would support the New Deal and help them. Some people, like the German civil engineer, clearly did respond to the FSA’s images in that simple, direct, humanitarian way. But as some of the other, more cynical, responses (“New Deal bunk”) to the Grand Central Palace exhibit suggest, the FSA photographers’ relationship to what is now called America’s “depression culture” was complicated.

Americans were confused and divided in the 1930s. Some of them looked at the Grand Central Palace exhibit and saw the need for social justice, and others looked at the same pictures and believed that the government was wasting their tax dollars or that what the “underprivileged” really needed were lessons in birth control. One of the few things that virtually all Americans did agree on in the 1930s was that the country was indeed suffering from “hard times.” As a young man who could afford to travel in Asia was informed by his parents in 1932, “We’re all having the worst ‘hard times’ in human memory. . . . Better off for you to stay in China for a while, especially if you have something worthwhile you can do there.” The situation was summarized particularly well by S. K. Ratcliffe, an English editor. In June 1931, after analyzing unemployment statistics, relief measures, and the American political situation, he concluded that one of the most drastic effects of the depression was psychological. “The great overturn has wrought an immense change in the American mind, and perhaps most of all in the collective business mind,” he said.

When Mr. Coolidge retired from the presidency the American people were enjoying a sense of power and well-being such as no nation in the modern world had approached. American prosperity was a commanding reality; it was rare to find an American citizen who was prepared to express a serious doubt as to the permanence of the structure of [the American economic system]. And—more
significant still—the theory that America had opened the road to plenty, discovered the secret of continuous prosperity, and abolished the cycle of good and bad trade, was carried from the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce into the colleges; it was being adopted as the new orthodoxy... Of all this, needless to say, nothing whatever is now to be heard. The shock of the depression has been terrific, overwhelming, and there does not exist in any country so widespread a spirit of perplexity, concern, and self-criticism.2

The material prosperity of the United States in the 1920s increased for a number of reasons: the enormous influx of capital from Europe during World War I, which allowed American investors and industrialists to exploit their own and other countries' natural resources more vigorously; the increasing efficiency of the automobile and other mass-production industries through labor-saving machinery; the abundant supply of cheap foods from America's farms, which gave even poorly paid urban workers the disposable income they needed to buy cheap, standardized, industrial products; and the increasing use of advertising and easy credit to sell these products. One of the more important effects of this prosperity was the tendency, in much of the nation's popular media, at least, to treat people in big business as culture heroes who were responsible for "the world's highest standard of living." The small-time Babbitts back in the Rotary Clubs might be fair game for satirists like Sinclair Lewis; but, according to Stuart Chase, by 1929 leaders of big business had "ousted the philosopher, teacher, statesman, editor and preacher" as "spiritual leaders" and "entrenched themselves as the dictators of American life and habits."3 A coalition of millionaires, owners and managers of major manufacturing industries, and communications and media "magnates," they were supposedly younger, better educated, more efficient, and more intelligent than their predecessors, the bad old robber barons of the Gilded Age. Their powers were summarized in November 1929 by a writer for the Magazine of Wall Street, who said that the stock market crash of the month before should not cause undue alarm since "this generation has conquered the air and annihilated time and space. The young leaders of our business world have brought the nation to its current high position in international commerce and business. They have developed a banking system which has withstood the trials of a market cataclysm and our business structure is amply buttressed to meet its aftermath."4

Business leaders, as this quote suggests, enjoyed a collective personality cult, but cults have a tendency to focus on particular individuals, and during the 1920s many admirers of big business were very impressed by Herbert Hoover and his efforts to create what he called, in his 1928 presidential campaign, a "New Day" and a "New Era" in American life. Like most presidents, Hoover was as much a symbol as an actual human being. Before the depression, he seemed to be, as Robert S. McElvaine wrote, "the perfect embodiment of the American Dream."5 His life story, before 1929, could have been written by Horatio Alger, Jr. He was orphaned at the age of nine, worked his way through Stanford, and went on to become not only a successful mining engineer but also a millionaire. He managed mines in exotic places like Australia and
China and then became director of the American Relief Administration, which, in Europe, "restored communications, conquered epidemics, moved millions of tons of food and other supplies, and overcame tremendous obstacles created by the British and French" after World War I. (American business leaders demonstrate the superiority of their methods to the Old World.) According to his admirers, he also used "food as a weapon to stem the Bolshevist tide" by helping to overthrow a Communist government in Hungary and a Socialist government in Finland. (American capitalists defeat the forces of world revolution.) As secretary of commerce between 1920 and 1928, Hoover promoted himself as a moderately progressive or liberal alternative to old guard Republicans by supporting such causes as child labor reform and the growth of American multinational corporations, particularly glamorous businesses like airlines and communications. Like the business executives who benefited from his programs, Hoover was well acquainted with the latest developments in communications and the media. He employed his own little corps of professional public relations experts and advisors, and he competently cultivated a number of influential editors and writers, like Mark Sullivan and William Allen White, who became his admirers and supporters. In 1928 his public relations team made a special movie about him from old war and flood relief film clips, entitled The Master of Emergencies, and distributed it to be shown at Republican organizations.  

Campaigning for the presidency that year, Hoover was a walking anthology of statements expressing the American Dream. Though he was not a liberal, he tried to gain liberal support by repeatedly stressing his belief in "equality of opportunity" as the "right of every American—rich or poor, foreign or native-born, irrespective of faith or color." But he put even more stress on America's prosperity and its superiority to other nations, two of the most common conservative motifs of the Dream. In his acceptance speech, he made his famous claim—often quoted by Democrats after 1929—that "We in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poorhouse is vanishing from among us." In the final, long address of his campaign in St. Louis, Missouri, he gave a particularly optimistic speech in which he said America was different from and better than other nations because it had a unique social, political, and economic system whose founders had been guided by "Divine inspiration." He claimed the United States had created "a new economic system" that would "steadily lift the standard of living of the whole people," and he strongly implied that his own activities as secretary of commerce had helped to "mitigate the violence of the so-called business cycle. . . . No one suffers more from these periodic hard times, with their hideous unemployment, decrease in wages, and bankruptcy in business, than both labor and the farmers. Time forbids a discussion of the intricate problems . . . and the remedies . . . [but] the proof of their effectiveness lies in the fact that we have had a far longer period of stability in industry and commerce, far greater security in employment, and larger buying power for farm products than ever before in our history." Not until forty years later, during the Tet offensive in Vietnam, did an American leader's dreams collide quite so violently with reality. An English writer, A. Fenner Brockway, traveling in the United States in the
winter of 1933 and seeing a Hooverville in St. Louis, believed that America was indeed different from other industrial nations—but not in a positive way. "In the depth of the American winter, on a day when a stabbing icy wind pierced the thickest overcoat, I saw the unemployed living on wastelands, in shacks put together from old boxes (wood and tin), bits of old motor cars, bits of corrugated iron, bits of cloth. I saw them lining up nearly three sides of a block waiting in a queue for soup. I saw them scrounging over refuse heaps like flies crawling over a dung hill. Even in India I had not seen destitution more horrible or humiliating."8

What Brockway saw in St. Louis was what the FSA photographers were trying to communicate in their photographs in the Grand Central Palace exhibit—bleak, squalid, total poverty—people without homes, without jobs, without food, and without hope. Throughout the 1930s other Americans described what Brockway and the FSA photographers had seen: John Steinbeck, in The Grapes of Wrath; critic Edmund Wilson, in his 1930 and 1931 reports on the nation’s poor in the New Republic; and journalist Lorena Hickok, in descriptions of the conditions she found in North Dakota in November 1933:

Yesterday I visited one of the “better-off” families on relief. In what was once a house I found two small boys, about two and four years old, running around without a stitch on save some ragged overalls. No stockings or shoes. Their feet were purple with cold... The kitchen floor was so patched up—with pieces of tin, can covers, a wash boiler cover, old automobile license plates—that you couldn’t tell what it might have looked like originally. Plaster falling off the walls. Newspapers stuffed in the cracks around the windows.

The mother of those children—bare-legged, although she wore some sneakers on her feet—is going to have another baby in January in that house.9

On the other hand, there were many other Americans throughout the 1930s who preferred to see different, more cheerful realities. Moreover, since restoring “confidence” was often considered a kind of public service, the purveyors of optimism could justify their activities on patriotic as well as commercial grounds. One of the most important features of the classic, hard-times FSA images—the kind that were shown at the Grand Central Palace exhibit—is that they were opposed to a great deal of the popular culture of the 1930s.13 As Ludwig Lewisohn commented in 1932 in a discussion of the popularity of “pseudo-romantic” fiction in the United States and the popularity of naive social reforms like Prohibition, “With this flight into illusion, with this inability to face facts, we must constantly reckon in the history of American civilization... At any cost we must be optimistic, at any cost unresigned to the changeless elements of man, of nature, and of human life. We must be optimists and we must be right.”11

This optimism, and the illusions that sustained it, however, did not come bubbling out of the facts of American reality like water from some pristine spring. Like so many other aspects of life in the United States during the 1930s as well as in later decades,
many of these illusions were consumer products, and it is not difficult to analyze their forms and their functions—and to see how different they were from the FSA photographers’ images. Dos Passos’s grim pronouncement in *The Big Money*—“All right we are two nations”—not only applies to the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. It also applies to the ways middle-class Americans were willing to perceive their nation. Some read Dos Passos’s novels and James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan*, others read Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Some acknowledged the soup kitchens and bread lines in the Bowery, others saw only debutante balls and shows at Radio City Music Hall. For some, life in the 1930s meant Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” and for others it meant Shirley Temple in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.

Optimism was considered a profitable commodity and was promoted not only to sell products but also to “cure” the depression. “What this country needs is a good big laugh... If someone could get off a good joke every ten days, I think our troubles would be over,” Herbert Hoover announced early in 1931. Many of the business leaders who controlled the nation’s mass media seem to have agreed with him. George B. Hill of the American Tobacco Company, for example, personally selected the music played on his company’s Lucky Strike radio hour and “insisted that the dance music have strongly marked rhythms, rapid tempos, and crashing noise. Such music gave people confidence, he said. It was an antidote to the Depression.” Hollywood, as many commentators on the depression have pointed out, was another great source of optimism. As Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors, proudly explained in 1936, “No medium has contributed more greatly than the film to the maintenance of the national morale during a period featured [sic] by revolution, riot and political turmoil in other countries. It has been the mission of the screen, without ignoring the serious problems of the day, to reflect aspiration, optimism, and kindly humor in its entertainment.”

In the 1930s only a few Americans made films, like King Vidor’s *Our Daily Bread* and Paul Strand’s *The Wave*, emphasizing the need for any sort of collective social action. (Even then, Vidor had a great deal of difficulty raising the money to finance his film, and Strand made his in Mexico.) Far more popular, and profitable, were the sentimental, conservative, populist movies of the period in which the good, small-town capitalists of America helped one another and the idle rich, big-city snobs—who tried to humiliate or exploit the good guys—were either defeated or converted to more humanitarian values in the films’ happy endings. In one of the most popular of these films, Frank Capra’s 1936 *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, Longfellow Deeds, a young man from a small town in Iowa, inherits a fortune and goes to the big city, where the cynics and snobs try to persuade him to give his money to an opera. But after a poverty-stricken, demented farmer tries to shoot him Deeds decides, despite the opposition of the city-slickers who try to have him declared insane, to give his fortune to small farmers so they can buy farms. With a little imagination, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* can be interpreted as a liberal, New Deal parable in which Deeds, like the FSA, gives the
little farmers of America the land they need to survive. It can just as easily be interpreted, though, as a conservative fantasy in which the old, voluntary relief efforts that Hoover promoted so strenuously are carried out by a generous millionaire.14

In contrast, in many of the FSA's classic images of the depression—like Rothstein's famous "Dust Storm"—it is not only the desolation of the land that is disturbing but also the isolation of the people. Even the family does not seem intact. The mother is not in sight, and we can see only the farmer and his two little sons running toward their bleak storm shelter. An entire decade's fear can be read in Lange's caption for her 1937 picture of a woman crouching beside her baby and an old, stalled car by U.S. 99 in California: "Broke, Baby Sick, and Car Trouble!" No one else is in sight, and the woman, looking away from the photographer, is staring down the road. Waiting for her husband to return with help? And what if he does not return215

The Hollywood musicals of the period were just as optimistic as the sentimental comedies, though in a slightly different way. As Gerald Mast pointed out, the plots of these films, particularly those made in the early 1930s and choreographed by Busby Berkeley, "never tried to be believable." The real sources of their optimism were the "grandiose and grotesquely imaginative patterns" of Berkeley's dances, which created the illusion of unlimited energy both frenetic and perfectly synchronized.16 Many of the FSA photographers' hard-times images show the grim faces and stooped bodies of people who are exhausted and worn down by hard work or, if they are unemployed or migrating, haggard with anxiety. But in the musical comedies of the early 1930s we see and hear those same qualities of American popular culture that a writer analyzed very well in a 1982 Partisan Review article. Commenting on listening to Linda Ronstadt records and seeing Superman and television shows like "Kojak" and "I Love Lucy" in Africa, she wrote, "Hearing American-made rock music or seeing reruns of television shows in this context, one is immediately struck by the sheer energy of it all—the amplified, frenetic electronics, the endless car chases and escapades. . . . No wonder we are perceived as having a power far beyond what we actually possess."17 It is precisely this energy that helped to make Hollywood musicals and big band jazz so popular in the depression, as well as later. They entertained anxious, powerless people with the illusion that they had escaped into a fantasyland in which everyone wore tuxedos and evening gowns, no one ever stopped smiling, and the dancing and music went on and on.

Americans also had the American Dream itself to cheer them up during the depression. Even though Herbert Hoover and big business were not as popular as they had been in the 1920s, their conservative version of the Dream continued to flourish in popular guidebooks to success, inspirational biographies, and fiction in magazines like Liberty, American Magazine, and the Saturday Evening Post. After reading hundreds of these works, Charles Hearn concluded that the rags-to-riches, get-rich-quick idea was almost as ubiquitous in the 1930s as it had been earlier in the century. "Clearly a large number of people were not yet ready to give up their image of America as a Horatio Alger paradise where anyone willing to make the effort could find success and happiness. On the popular level, the bitter experience of the Depression did not deal
the death blow to the capacity for dreaming, the idealistic faith in the future, the extravagant expectations that Americans have been noted for. To judge from the popular literature of the period, the capacity to dream suffered much less than the capacity to face reality and to distinguish legitimate hopes from puerile illusions. Another notable feature of these works, Hearn emphasized, was that so many of them were "transparently didactic stories" that expounded such themes as "the importance of ambition, industry, and self-help . . . with a deadly seriousness worthy of the most propagandistic proletarian novel." At the same time, the frontier version of the American Dream was an extremely popular subject in history books written and murals painted during the depression. In fact, even the phrase "the American Dream" was popularized by a 1931 history book—James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America*—that glorified the frontier as being the origin of the American Dream and of most of the nation's virtues and values. (According to Allan Nevins, Adams fought to have the book titled *The American Dream*, but was overruled by his publisher "on the ground that book buyers would never pay $3 for a 'dream'.")

Written in London in only five months, between October 1930 and March 1931, *The Epic of America* received excellent reviews. It was a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, and it went through ten printings by the spring of 1932. Even though he wrote his book over three thousand miles away from the breadlines and Hoovervilles of what was left of his nation's industrial civilization, Adams understood very well what it was that many Americans wanted to learn about themselves in the early 1930s. As one of his fellow historians told him, "You have written a book that should be recommended—nay, imposed—by every teacher as necessary reading for his students." *The Epic of America* placed most of the blame for what was wrong with America, including the depression, on speculators and leaders of big business. Adams was particularly critical of the great industrialists and capitalists, whom Teddy Roosevelt castigated as "malefactors of great wealth," because they made social and economic equality impossible. During the Gilded Age, Adams claimed, "the rights of man in the Declaration of Independence had collided with the new doctrine of the divinity that doth hedge a capitalist if he is big enough. To such men [the robber barons], the American dream was drivel." He criticized certain aspects of American frontier life for being "almost unbearably narrow," lonely, and monotonous; but he placed far more emphasis on his belief that the frontier had been a great positive force in the nation's history. It had created "that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world." On the frontier, Adams said, everyone had been free to work for a better life, and "hard work became transmuted into a moral virtue and leisure into evil." In addition to inspiring the work ethic, the frontier had inspired the revolution and the settlement of the West. It became "the voice of the early Americans who had been promised 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' by Thomas Jefferson," Adams said. He claimed that, even though the frontier was officially closed in the 1890s, the Dream continued to inspire the populist and progressive political movements in the twentieth century and would very soon
again lead the common people to reform their nation. “Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of the ordinary Americans to save that dream... Possibly the greatest of those struggles lies just ahead of us at this present time.”

This inspirational vision of rural and frontier America was expressed in many murals painted in post offices and federal buildings between the mid-1930s and 1943 as part of a New Deal patronage program for artists. The design of the murals had to be approved by representatives from local communities, and artists had to redesign their work if there were objections: the final murals represented the “collective taste of the citizens of the community, together with the individual taste of the artist.”

Above all, as Karal Marling points out, both artists and communities in the late 1930s had a taste for lots of good hard work. “In the logging camps, the steel mills, the factories, and the mines of Mural America, people threw themselves into their work with grateful abandon. In vast tracts of Mural America, nobody looked for work, waited for a job or fled west on the roof of a boxcar... because everybody could pick up the tools and do the job at home.” In the grim America outside the murals, Marling reminds us, were the Americans that Dorothea Lange photographed on U.S. 66 in Oklahoma, during a decade when “on any given day... two million refugees were roaming the country, riding the rods, hitching rides, looking for work.” But in the murals prospectors were finding the ores that would make their towns prosper (as in Kellogg, Idaho, and Chisholm, Minnesota), black farmers were hauling their cotton to bustling cotton gins and warehouses (as in Leland, Mississippi), and white farmers were harvesting bountiful crops (as in Spencer, Indiana, and Bridgeport, Ohio, and Seneca, Kansas) or clearing land to plant more acres (as in Mercer, Pennsylvania). In Paris, Arkansas, the townspeople were led by a newspaper editor and a congressman to protest that the work in Joseph Vorst’s sketch for their town’s mural—a tenant farmer pushing a manual plow by a ramshackle cabin—was not inspiring enough. Vorst defended his work on the grounds that he “made that sketch from life during my recent visit to Paris and it is authentic.” But after he visited Arkansas again and talked to a “committee of local citizens, including the Postmaster, Editor, and Banker,” Vorst revised his design to conform to what was considered “authentic” in Paris. The final mural featured a bustling, modern stock-breeding farm, a coal mine, and a busy cotton gin. Every building in the mural, as Marling notes, is “spanking new, freshly painted, and soundly roofed.” Even the humblest field hands “wear neat, presentable overalls,” and “of the fourteen figures shown in the painting, thirteen are intensely busy.”

John Steuart Curry, one of the nation’s best-known and most popular painters in the 1930s, carried this vision of America to its idyllic extreme in murals about rural and frontier life. The Movement of the Population Westward, his mural in the Justice Building in Washington, D.C., shows burly, stalwart pioneers striding heroically toward the setting sun as they lead a procession of covered wagons. His 1938 Land Rush mural in the Department of the Interior depicts a horde of settlers rushing into the Oklahoma Territory on horseback, covered wagons, buckboards, and even high-wheel bicycles, while in the background a steaming locomotive rushes across the horizon—presum-
ably pulling cars filled with even more settlers. To his admirers, Curry's idealized rural landscapes were "hallowed ground," the icons of a national religion. One of his rural paintings, an art critic wrote in 1935, disclosed "a powerful spirit born of America, inspired by America and dedicated to American ideas and ideals. . . . [It is] historical in that it mirrors our contemporary will to believe in ourselves."24

The FSA photographers' hard-times images, considered in the context of the nation's mass media and popular culture, were resolutely opposed to the optimistic illusions, dreams, myths, and inspirations so popular during the 1930s. If such cultural phenomena as Capra's films, Adams's The Epic of America, and Curry's murals are "historical," in the sense that they expressed Americans' "will to believe" in themselves, the FSA hard-times photographs were historical in the very different sense that they communicated the conditions under which poor Americans lived and the effects the nation's hard times had on actual men, women, and children. After seeing these images at the Grand Central Palace exhibit in 1938, art critic Elizabeth McCausland commented:

After the usual diet of the art world—cream puffs, eclairs, and such—the hard, bitter reality of these photographs is the tonic the soul needs. They are like a sharp wind, sweeping away the weariness. . . . In them we see the faces of the American people. The American people which lives under the threat of unemployment, hunger and eviction. We see the farmers, the sharecroppers, the homeless migrant agricultural workers, the children who suffer from malnutrition, the whole families whose homes are part of that dreadful substandard "one-third of a nation."

In these photographs we might see also (if we were completely honest and fearless intellectually) the face of ourselves. For, if the past decade has taught us no other thing, it has showed that the vaunted economic security of the prosperous citizen is no more secure than the marginal life of the depressed millions.25

The style and techniques of the FSA photographers' hard-times documentary pictures did not originate from any single source or policy. Officially, the group was known as the Historical Section of the Information Division of the Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration), a New Deal agency organized by Rexford Tugwell, one of the original members of Roosevelt's "brains trust." Tugwell, who had been an economics professor at Columbia University in the 1920s, was one of the more controversial people, and the Resettlement Administration (RA) was one of the more controversial agencies, in the New Deal. At a staff meeting in July 1935, Tugwell "predicted that the agency would be highly vulnerable to attack, that it would be closely watched by its enemies, and that its leaders had better prepare their defenses against internal conflict and external attack." He was right. Virtually every policy that his agency formulated or implemented was denounced as "commu-
nistic," "socialist," "impractical," or a "waste of money." Nevertheless, since hundreds of thousands of destitute American farmers were either roaming the roads or in danger of losing their farms, Tugwell did not run a timid agency. By June 1936 the RA's efforts in 'rural rehabilitation' had been extended to 536,302 farm families, reaching more than two million people, and the agency spent 60 percent of its budget, approximately $95 million, on assorted programs, loans, and grants for poor farmers. Under the circumstances, it was logical for Tugwell to hire Roy Stryker, one of his colleagues at Columbia, to organize an Historical Section to photograph the good work his agency was doing in 'rural rehabilitation' and in setting up experimental farms and running camps for migrant workers. During the eight years it was in existence, the FSA photography unit made plenty of pleasant, uncontroversial, informational photographs of these subjects, which were not particularly different from the thousands of pictures produced at the time by other government agencies, corporations, and photo services like Ewing Galloway. They were considered "documents" in the 1930s because they dealt with factual subjects and were used for educational and publicity purposes. But, as Edward Steichen pointed out in his review of the Grand Central Palace exhibit, besides "producing this kind of 'tweedle dum' and 'tweedle dee'" photography, the FSA photographers also made "human documents" that many visitors to the exhibit found disturbing; "these documents told stories and told them with such simple and blunt directness that they made many a citizen wince."

Roy Stryker, the administrator of the photography unit, was not much interested in the technical side of photography, but he did have what John Vachon called a "half-formed concept" of what should be photographed. Photographers were starting to use terms like "documentary" and "documentary style" for certain kinds of images; and when Stryker began to recruit his photographers in 1935 he believed "it might be appropriate to gather together a collection of photographs of all aspects of American rural life, with [an] emphasis on what had gone wrong: deforestation, soil erosion, migrant fruit pickers, and hungry children." Moreover, the years he had spent growing up on farms and ranches in the West and teaching economics to undergraduates at Columbia had given him a great deal of information about American agriculture, which he imparted to the photographers in long briefings in Washington and in shooting scripts which he sent to them when they were on their travels. Just to be on the safe side, he also made them read vast amounts of J. Russell Smith's *North America*, an encyclopedic, one-volume survey of the continent's economic geography. While he was at Columbia in the 1920s, Stryker coauthored Tugwell's and Thomas Munro's 1925 textbook, *American Economic Life*. His contribution was to find visual materials to illustrate the book, and in the course of doing that he learned something about social photography from Lewis Hine, who provided him with many of the book's illustrations. It was probably from his experience of working with Hine that Stryker learned the value of emphasizing details that, even though they might seem insignificant and shabby, revealed the quality of peoples' lives. It was Stryker, Arthur Rothstein said, who "made me aware of the fact that it was important, say, to photograph the corner of a cabin showing [an] old shoe and a bag of flour... and it was important to
show a window stuffed with rags.” Finally, Stryker imparted a certain amount of useful skepticism to his photographers regarding any illusions they might have about their country or the optimistic clichés flourishing in its media. “He was a kind of friendly and effervescent tyrant,” Vachon recalled, “from whom I heard, for the first time in my life, that the American economic system had some imperfections, that the Negro hadn’t been freed by Abraham Lincoln, and that it wasn’t necessarily true because you read it in the Saturday Evening Post.”

In addition to teaching his photographers, Stryker learned from them. Vachon believed that of the main, original group of photographers Stryker hired (Evans, Rothstein, Lange, and Carl Mydans—who was replaced in 1936 by Russell Lee), Lange, Evans, and the artist Ben Shahn had the strongest influence on him during the formative stages of the photography unit. Shahn was an unofficial member of the unit. He was hired by a different branch of the RA to make posters and paintings, but after he went on a field trip with a camera the pictures he brought back were so good Stryker put them in his file. Shahn worked with Diego Rivera on the Radio City Music Hall murals and was a member of the left-wing artists group, Art Front. He helped Stryker understand that it was not enough to photograph factual “conditions” clearly and carefully: the photographer also had to try to show the effects they had upon human beings. Looking at a picture of bad farmland, for example, he explained, “You’re not going to move anybody with this [picture of] eroded soil—but the effect that this eroded soil has on a kid who looks starved, this is going to move people.”

Walker Evans, one of Shahn’s friends, was probably the member of the group who knew the most about the kind of photographic modernism that had begun to appear in America and Europe in the 1920s, but was still not well-known outside of avant-garde artistic circles. By the early 1930s he had seen Eugene Atget’s architectural photographs and the work of Ralph Steiner, one of the first American street photographers; and he had been very impressed by Paul Strand’s extremely forceful and incisive modernist images in a copy of Stieglitz’s Camera Work. “I came across that picture of Strand’s blind woman and that really bowled me over,” Evans wrote to a friend in 1929. “That’s a very powerful picture. . . . That’s the stuff, that’s the thing to do.” Strand’s images are notable for their intense clarity, his technique of composing his images so that they are filled with sharp, hard, concentrated detail. Even before he started working for the FSA, Evans had begun making some powerful images of his own—notably a series of portraits of dockworkers and coal handlers made in Havana in 1932, which have the same direct eye contact and grim forcefulness that characterize his more famous portraits of sharecroppers in Alabama in 1936.

Dorothea Lange also influenced the unit early in its development with many of her best-known, most explicitly compassionate images of migrant farm workers and sharecroppers. Lange began her career in the 1920s as a rather conventional portrait photographer. She was associated with the West Coast modernist “Group f.64” in the early 1930s, but even before she joined the FSA photography unit in 1935 she had begun photographing the rural poor with great emotional commitment and concern. As she said later about the circumstances under which she made “Migrant Mother” in
1936, "Had I not been deeply involved in my undertaking on that field trip, I would not have had to turn back [and visit the migrant labor camp]. What I am trying to say is that I believe this inner compulsion to be the vital ingredient. . . . If our work is to carry force and meaning to our view, we must be willing to go all out." It is in her images that we perceive most directly the sense of commitment that characterized the New Deal; Roosevelt's phrases, like "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid," and "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," were not the usual American political clichés, but a stimulus for concern and action, a determination not only to "see" the poor people of the United States, but to do something to make their lives better and more secure.32

Though it is important to recognize the contributions of Stryker, Lange, Evans, and Shahn to the FSA documentary style and technique, it is more important to realize that they also functioned as a group and interacted with one another. When they were in Washington, they saw each others' prints and learned techniques and approaches. When new photographers—like John Vachon, Gordon Parks, Jack Delano, and Marion Post Wolcott—joined the unit, they could see and learn from their predecessors' earlier work. Thus, within a relatively short time, the FSA photographers created a documentary tradition of their own, which is most identifiable in their hard-times images.

First of all, as a group trying to show what had gone wrong with America, the FSA photographers had an aversion to the conservative, big business clichés about American economic life that continued to flourish in the 1930s along with the sufferings of the depression. They expressed this attitude most clearly in the deliberately ironic photographs they made of certain billboards that were part of what Life magazine called a "propaganda campaign" by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) in the 1930s.

The most famous picture of the NAM billboards was made by Margaret Bourke-White, who was not an FSA photographer: she photographed a line of poor black people waiting for relief food in front of a NAM billboard that showed a prosperous, middle-class, white family riding in their car. The billboard slogans said WORLD'S HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING and THERE'S NO WAY LIKE THE AMERICAN WAY. Bourke-White's picture appeared in the 15 February 1937 issue of Life magazine as part of a news story about a flood in the Ohio River valley, and the black people were flood victims waiting outside a relief agency in Louisville, Kentucky. Bourke-White's image was intended to illustrate the flood conditions only, not the depression, and the magazine's caption for her full-page picture ended with a mild comment that, since more relief was needed, "It was going to take a lot of money to restore the American standard of living in . . . the Ohio Valley." On the other hand, the FSA photographers were quite assiduous in their pursuit of NAM and other big business propaganda billboards, and their irony was more deliberate. According to Arthur Rothstein, they considered the Manufacturers' clichés about the American standard of living so absurd—at a time when millions of Americans were suffering from the depression—that they treated the billboards as fair game for visual ironies.33 Rothstein photo-
graphed a NAM billboard in a weedy lot in Birmingham, Alabama, at the same time Bourke-White did, and Edwin Locke photographed another one (see illustration above) in the same month near Kingwood, West Virginia, which shows three rundown houses perched on a hill overlooking the billboard. In January 1938, Russell Lee photographed a WHAT HELPS BUSINESS HELPS YOU billboard on Fourth Avenue in New York City, next to another billboard advertising a Broadway show, saying HOORAY FOR WHAT?, so that the two slogans are neatly juxtaposed. In 1940 John Vachon made photographs of two NAM billboards in Dubuque, Iowa, one of which is being read by a migrant worker with a bundle on his back. Dorothea Lange seems to have had the keenest eye for these billboards. In addition to finding three of them with different messages on U.S. 99 in California in 1937, she photographed a WHAT HURTS BUSINESS HURTS ME billboard (with a picture of a pouting baby) standing over the shacks of a squatter camp near Porterville, California, in 1938; and she photographed Southern Pacific billboards (NEXT TIME TRY THE TRAIN—RELAX) in 1937 and 1938 on California roads where migrant workers were trudging by on foot and where families like the one Shahn photographed in 1935 ("A Destitute Family") were camping in their jalopies underneath billboards to try to escape from the wind and cold.34

Seen in this new, ironic context, the middle-class family in the NAM billboards seems very smug and indifferent. Secure in their little car and in the American way of life, they appear to be totally oblivious to the depression all around them. In Lange's Southern Pacific billboard image, this indifference is shown by the railroad passenger's position and closed eyes. Of course you can smile and relax, Lange's image

Edwin Locke, NAM billboard near Kingwood, West Virginia, 1937

(Library of Congress)
implies, if you are riding through life asleep to the miseries around you. Her image, therefore, is also a satire on consumerism and the many advertising campaigns that encourage middle-class people to think only of their own comforts, even during times when millions of other people are homeless and hungry. (It is also significant that—like many other “emotional” advertisements of the same period—the NAM billboards were drawn in the bland, cheerful style used for Dick-and-Jane primary school readers. The people have the same chubby cheeks and inhabit the same Dick-and-Jane world of smiling daddies, pretty mommies, cheerful pets, and grinning children—always two to a family—which is the antithesis of the grim realities in the FSA photographers’ images of migrant mothers, haggard fathers, and dirty children living in sharecropper’s shacks and migrant labor camps.)35

In a 1978 analysis of Bourke-White’s picture of the Louisville NAM billboard, John Walker pointed out that, even though she might not have consciously intended it, there are a number of ideological implications present in her image: the middle-class whites seem to “dominate” the black people; and the NAM image reinforces such values as patriarchy (the father commanding his car and family), the nuclear family, and “dependence on technology.”36 In 1937, however, the NAM billboards suggested other, more specifically political, implications. The NAM began to attack the New Deal in 1935. “The N.A.M. Declares War,” warned a Business Week article about the Manufacturers’ 1935 convention, which was devoted mainly to angry criticisms of the New Deal. In the late summer of 1936, the NAM launched an ambitious newspaper advertising campaign (with headings like “What Is Your America All About?,” “American Standards of Living,” and “America’s Tomorrow”) designed to refute “New Deal
orators, Townsendites, Coughlinites, Socialists, and Communists." Even though the advertisements were not ostensibly political, they were scheduled to appear in thousands of newspapers all over the country at regular intervals from the end of August until the end of October: exactly the same time that the 1936 election campaign was taking place.

Despite the opposition of the NAM, as well as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Liberty League, and many newspapers, Roosevelt won a substantial reelection victory in 1936 (60.8 percent of the ballots cast and 523 of 531 electoral votes). When the Manufacturers met again in December 1936, they spoke as if they intended to cooperate with the New Deal, “to make any changes necessary to complete harmony [sic] with national thought.” But, at the same time, the NAM was steadily increasing its activities and expenditures for “public relations” from $36,500 in 1934 to $793,043 in 1937. (In 1935 and 1936, respectively, these figures were $112,659 and $467,759.) According to Alfred Hirsch, a journalist writing in the Forum in 1938, the NAM was
spending this money not only on sixty thousand American Way billboards but also on a news service, two recorded radio programs, a movie (Let's Go America), which was distributed free to movie theaters, and a campaign to place NAM "educational" materials in school libraries and to bring speakers to high school assemblies. In the case of the billboards, the NAM obviously decided not only to sell its American Way "message" like cornflakes or cigarettes but also to rely on the same chicken-in-every-pot consumer version of the American Dream that had been so ubiquitous during the 1920s. It was, in effect, the American Dream of Hoover's "New Era," minus Hoover.

Thus, by photographing these billboards in the way they did, the FSA photographers pointed out that Americans had discovered other, grimmer realities since 1929: that, in the words of Elizabeth McCausland, they had learned "that the vaunted economic security of the prosperous citizen is no more secure than the marginal life of the depressed millions," that the American middle classes did not really exist on their own island of prosperity, as the NAM portrayed them.

In addition to giving the FSA photographers opportunities to express what they thought of big business and its clichés about America in the 1930s, their photographs of the NAM billboards probably helped them to clarify their awareness of what documentary photography should do and how it could be different from propaganda. In his review of the Grand Central Palace exhibit, Steichen reasoned that the FSA images were not "propaganda" because they were different from "Russian Official Photographs" of the same period, in which "the Soviet is represented as the home of fine, healthy, vigorous boys and girls . . . [and] lineups of tractors or automobiles giving the impression of miraculously synchronized high speed production." He then implied that the NAM's American Way images were equivalent to Russian propaganda because they also illustrated an idealized national reality, whereas the FSA photographs revealed discrepancies between their nation's ideals and its real conditions: "As a matter of fact, the whole tenor of these Soviet photographic [images] would seem to strive to get under a caption such as is presented on the 'World's highest wage' poster on page 48 which proclaims 'There is no way like the American way' [a 1937 Lange image of a NAM billboard standing on a weedy sandbank in California]. Then cast your eyes on the F.S.A. picture above this poster—a picture of a sharecropper's residence and children." In other words, the Russian and NAM pictures were propaganda because they presented an idealized reality as if it had been achieved, whereas the FSA pictures emphasized the ironic distance between the ideal and the reality.

While photographing the NAM billboards, the FSA photographers were developing their own visual techniques for contrasting, in a documentary style, American clichés with American realities. Steichen made this connection when he contrasted Lange's image of a NAM "poster" (actually a billboard) with a nearby photograph of a sharecropper's shack in the same exhibit, but by 1938 several FSA photographers had begun to make such connections within single photographic images, just as they had done in their NAM billboard pictures.

Selecting and framing two kinds of facts within the same image, Arthur Rothstein believed, could achieve a "third effect": an implicit comment on social conditions.
Rothstein’s own 1937 picture of the bootblack, for example, the fact that the subject is an old man contradicts the inherent optimism of the Disraeli quote, which becomes ironic in the context of the image. The fact that the man is not some kind of hobo who could be blamed for his own lack of success but a neat, well-organized person with a vest and sports coat, who has carefully painted and arranged his chair and box, also contributes to the irony. Rothstein composed the picture so that all of these details are clearly visible and juxtaposed with the bank’s sign. It is also important to realize that, whereas propaganda is designed for crude emotional effects (usually indignant anger or simple affirmation), Rothstein’s documentary image encourages a complex range of emotional responses. For example, we feel respect and pity for the bootblack because, despite his efforts to be respectable, he has obviously been waiting a long time for his “opportunity,” which probably will never arrive. He also does not look like the kind of person who needs “Travel Checks” to protect his funds.

There are also a good many FSA hard-times images in which facts are composed to tell a “story” in which causal relationships are implied. Soil erosion, for example, was a major problem in the depression; it caused both poverty and floods. When Walker Evans went to Mississippi, Stryker asked him to “put quite a little effort in getting us good land pictures, showing the erosion, sub-marginal areas, cut-over land. These should be taken whenever possible, showing the relationship of the land to the cultural decay.” Evans made a series of pictures in March 1936, near Jackson and Oxford, showing eroded land and gullies, and then he made an additional series, in Tupelo, in which he photographed eroded land near unpainted, ramshackle houses with sagging walls and porches. Rothstein made a similar photograph in Alabama, in which there is not only an unpainted house but also a listless young farmer leaning against it and staring at a bare, eroded hill obviously too barren to be farmed. But the most pathetic of the FSA photographers’ soil erosion pictures is Post Wolcott’s 1938 photograph of a bleak, shabby farmhouse in North Carolina, in front of which we see eroded land and two children walking toward the camera, one of them with the terribly bowed legs caused by rickets. In all of these images, the photographers connected the social and environmental causes with the human consequences of rural poverty by composing their images so that factual connections are dramatized.

In contrast, when Margaret Bourke-White—who became a popular photojournalist in the 1930s—photographed poor sharecroppers for her book You Have Seen Their Faces, she dramatized her subjects in a very different way. Traveling through the rural South in 1936 accompanied by her husband, writer Erskine Caldwell, Bourke-White often used melodramatic camera angles and lighting, but she rarely showed people in relation to their environments. For example, she photographed farmers from low camera angles so that they were dramatically outlined against the sky, but the land they farm is not even visible. She also made extreme close-ups of many of her subjects, particularly when they had grotesque or misshapen features, to heighten the emotional impact of her images. In addition, as Bourke-White went through the South, she photographed every cliché that was popular in the newspapers, movies, and popular fiction of the era: women in poke bonnets and gingham dresses, indolent
blacks, "white trash" sharecroppers, flood victims, chain gangs, and people with missing teeth and grotesque features. Caldwell's text, which accompanied Bourke-White's images, was sympathetic to the poor blacks and whites of the region (he blamed most of their troubles on greedy landlords), yet many of the photographs and captions were so insensitive they could have been used to justify all kinds of middle-class prejudices. An image of a rather presentable, poor, white family, for example, has
the caption, "Every month the relief office gives them four cans of beef, a can of dried peas and five dollars, and the old lady generally spends a dollar and a half of it for snuff." (Why bother with money for people on relief?) A caption reading, "I think it's only right that the government ought to be run with people like us in mind," is accompanied by a picture of an elderly white couple so ugly and degenerate that it could be interpreted as an argument for poll taxes. (Who would want to let these "white trash" vote?)**

Many of the farmers and their families in the FSA photographs were just as poor as those in You Have Seen Their Faces, but the FSA photographers almost invariably photographed their subjects in a more dignified and respectful way. For decades many prosperous Americans believed that the economic system dispensed a kind of justice as well as goods and services; hence, it was easy for them to blame the poor for being poor. During the Panic of 1893, the president of the University of Wisconsin warned
students that they should not assign the "wrong causes" to the suffering going on in America at the time, because "In a vast number, if not a majority of the cases, suffering has come from improvidence, from extravagance, or from dissipation." The same ideas were still in existence during the depression, but the FSA images showed that American farmers really were poor—that they obviously were not extravagant people who wasted their money on dissipation. Anyone looking at Russell Lee's picture of the four small children of an Iowa tenant farmer eating a "Christmas dinner" of corn bread and "a sort of thin soup" in a room with rough, unpainted board walls, would have realized that stories about rural poverty were not New Deal "propaganda," that these farmers really did need help if they and their families were going to survive. ("These pictures are great," one of the visitors to the Grand Central Palace exhibit wrote. "They speak a thousand words to especially enlighten people who have never seen much farm life—and do not believe such conditions can exist.") Moreover, unlike Bourke-White's images, many of the FSA photographs seem to have been made in ways that counteract, or at least undermine, the negative stereotypes that portrayed the rural poor as Tobacco Road freaks or shiftless ne'er-do-wells. "To my knowledge," Stryker later claimed, "there is no photo in the FSA collection that in any way whatsoever represents an attempt by the photographer to ridicule his subject, to be cute with him, to abuse his privacy, or to present him as [a] cliche."

Most significantly, the FSA photographers seemed to have avoided photographing people who looked noticeably strange or grotesque. As Russell Lee told the old woman in Minnesota in 1937, "We want to show them that you're a human being, a nice human being, but you're having troubles." The photographers' subjects may look very poor—the men wear overalls, the women sometimes wear sack dresses, and the children may be dirty and half-naked—but at least they look like human beings. It is also noticeable that, though the subjects quite often appeared anxious or weary, they seldom were photographed either when they looked very excited or when they looked dull-eyed and apathetic. Also, the camera distances and angles that Lee and the other FSA photographers used are relatively normal, and the way that the people look at the camera implies a casual social equality. Even sharecroppers in their shacks or standing by their jalopies were allowed to pose themselves in an informal but presentable manner. When Lange photographed people on the road or on their farms, for example, "she would explain who she was and why she was there, and talk about the weather or the crops or any nearby children. . . . She would answer any questions the people had and ask them questions in a direct, friendly way, equal to equal. She would ask if she could take their picture to remember the meeting and for the government. If the people said no, she didn't press. If they said yes, she would continue chatting. . . . As she took pictures . . . she continued asking neighborly questions."

It is also significant that the FSA photographers sometimes selected situations that would show rural Americans trying to improve their own, or their children's, lives. This is particularly obvious in the pictures that Lee, Rothstein, and Post Wolcott made of rural schools in Kentucky, Texas, and the South in the late 1930s and that John Collier made of an Hispanic school in New Mexico in January 1943. The school-
rooms, by middle-class, urban standards of the time, are scarcely better than shacks; the one in New Mexico is so cold that the teachers and many of the children are wearing coats, and the partition separating the two classrooms is made of rough planks. But in all of these images the teachers are serious and dedicated, the children are poor but clean, and—particularly in Post Wolcott’s Kentucky photographs—they seem eager to learn. The black people in Lee’s Texas and Louisiana pictures and Rothstein’s Arkansas photograph are even worse off, materially, than the whites or Hispanics. They do not have schools or blackboards, yet they are trying to teach one another, and the children are attentive and respectful. Both Lee and Rothstein emphasize a subtle but significant juxtaposition of middle-class signs and values with facts of rural poverty. For example, a young black woman uses a stick instead of a pointer, and a black man uses planks for a chalkboard, yet both of them take their responsibilities as adults and teachers very seriously. In another picture that Lee made of the same black woman in Transylvania, Louisiana, she stands in the doorway of her shack, a typical, “underprivileged” FSA client, the “wife . . . of a Negro sharecropper who will benefit” from a resettlement project; but standing in front of her homemade blackboard, trying to teach her children to read, she symbolizes the desire of poor black people to improve themselves and their children.

These images contradict the negative, middle-class stereotypes that rural blacks, whites, or Hispanics are poor because they are “ignorant,” “illiterate,” or “racially inferior.” Instead, as an Alabama journalist commented in a 1939 article in the Survey Graphic, which was illustrated by one of Lee’s pictures, these images were an indictment “of race discrimination in education—a failure of democracy with economic, social and political repercussions throughout our national life.”49 This idea was further emphasized by the caption for Lee’s image: “Because there is no school, this half literate mother does her best for her children at home.” In other words, the blacks are not to blame for this situation, but it is America in general, and the southern states in particular, that have failed to provide black people with schools. In the context of the 1930s, photographs like these also implicitly invoked the liberal version of the American Dream, as they presented a positive view of their subjects as people who were capable of working, mentally as well as physically, to improve themselves.

Another important quality in some of the FSA photographs was expressed very well by Dorothea Lange in a comment on Walker Evans. “There is a bitterness. . . . There is an edge, a bitter edge to Walker—that I sense—and it is pleasurable to me. I like that bitter edge.”50 This “edge” expresses a kind of quiet anger mixed with sorrow, a sense that some of the things that were wrong with America were never going to become right. The New Deal and the FSA might have helped some people, like the FSA clients, to better their lives; but the millennium had not arrived in America, and the FSA photographers showed this very clearly in some of their images. These are not, however, melodramatic “protest” images, like many of Riis’s slum photographs and some of Bourke-White’s pictures are. Instead, they are carefully composed, well-lit, informative, understated images in which every detail is an indictment.

We can see this “bitter edge” in Lange’s 1937 pictures of black sharecroppers.
Russell Lee, "A Negro mother teaching her children the numbers and alphabet in her home," Transylvania, Louisiana, 1939 (Library of Congress)

hoeing fields in Georgia and Mississippi. In each image, thin, ragged people—Steichen called them "scare crows"—stand as if tied to the bleak land by their hoe handles, outlined against flat, distant horizons. The land, like their labor, seems endless, without a tree, fence, or building in sight. A sequence of two pictures in Lange's *American Exodus* of "Tenant Farmers without Farms" in Texas in 1938, is equally bitter in a quiet way. Apparently waiting to be hired for day labor, or perhaps to rent farms, the six men are posed standing in a line in the first photograph. They are all relatively young white men; all of them look strong and hard-working; and all of them are serious, clean-shaven, and dressed in presentable overalls or work clothing. In the second photograph, made a half hour later, the same six men are still waiting, but now they are all crouching or sitting—and each of them looks a little grimmer, a little more anxious and vulnerable.51

This bitter edge appears in many of Evans's and Rothstein's pictures of industrial subjects. Evans, in one of his best-known photographs (of a stone cross overlooking graves, houses, and steel mills in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania), used a special lens—which had the same effect as a telephoto lens—to narrow the depth of field so that the whole scene is like a bleak cemetery with the houses compressed between the mills and the graveyard. In one of his less-known pictures—a very carefully composed image of a junkyard in a field—the cars seem so angular, cluttered, and alien that they
contaminate the landscape. In thousands of other American images of technology and automobiles, particularly those in advertisements and illustrations, the machine is a symbol of power or a delightful possession that gives people access to nature by enabling them to go easily to scenic places; but in Evans's picture, technology's domination of nature is oppressive and ugly. His photograph of the company housing erected by a steel mill in Birmingham, Alabama, deliberately emphasizes its regimentation. Not only are all the houses alike and set in straight lines but also their outhouses stand in line, each in its barren, empty, little backyard.52

Rothstein made an equally bleak picture of company housing for miners in Birmingham. He photographed slums that stood in front of steel mills in Ensley, Alabama; he made photographs of coal-mining towns in Illinois, in which the tipples loom over the drab, little houses; and—in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania—the coal tipples of an abandoned mine stands over the tombstones in a small cemetery. But Rothstein's grimmest industrial landscapes are the ones he made in the West in the spring and summer of 1939. In his May 1939 picture, a Meaderville, Montana, copper mine has created a completely sterile landscape; the houses are pressed between the mines and the junk in the foreground, and beside the highway in the distance there are the usual billboards, presumably advertising the usual delightful products of American industry (see Rothstein's "Copper mine and miners' homes"). Rothstein's brilliantly composed image of Butte, Montana, which he made in June 1939, is even harsher. Beneath a cloudy, overcast sky, the angular shapes of the mine equipment and tin sheds, the trucks and steam shovels, all loom over and encroach on the precarious living space a family has tried to create in their yard—a little lawn, two pine trees, clothes drying on a line. In one corner of the picture, a child sits on a curb looking at the trash and debris all around her. In photographic images of the 1930s and 1940s, which idealized industry, mines and their surroundings were seen as elegant abstractions, usually from distant aerial views, and machinery functioned in splendid isolation, efficiently turning out the shiny products that would make everyone's lives richer and better. But in Rothstein's and Evans's images, industry is associated with drabness, junk, death, and squalor; and, as in Lange's images of sharecroppers and tenant farmers, there are no hints that these conditions will ever change for the better.53

Rothstein and Evans expressed their viewpoints in these industrial pictures by composing their images very carefully. But at other times the FSA photographers expressed bitter realities through a simple emphasis on the grim or sad facts of American life that they happened to notice. Traveling through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 1937, for example, Russell Lee saw barren, cutover swamps being sold as farm land, and he photographed the sign advertising it as CHOICE FARM LAND FOR SALE that stood in a field filled with stumps and second-growth timber. When John Vachon photographed a 1940 shantytown on the edge of a city dump in Dubuque, Iowa, he picked a tar paper shanty whose owner had decorated it with a sign advertising a housing development: NEW AMERICAN HOME OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. Ben Shahn went to Morgantown, West Virginia, during a strike, and photographed a deputy guarding not a factory or a mine but a grocery store; he photographed the man from
the back to emphasize his fat buttocks and his revolver—a sinister but humorous comment on how the prosperous people of Morgantown protected themselves against the hungry ones.54

It is also significant that many of these FSA images were not specifically related to the depression. As they traveled around the country taking the pictures that Stryker needed for his file showing “what had gone wrong” with rural America, the FSA photographers noticed and photographed other things that were still going wrong: regimentation, ugliness, blighted environments, fraud, inequality, and repression. In other words, they were becoming social critics and using their photographs to express their viewpoints.

Mixed in with these criticisms of American life in the FSA file, however, are many rather pleasant, affirmative pictures. After seeing Edward Steichen’s 1962 exhibit of FSA hard-times photographs, *The Bitter Years* (which was essentially a reprise of the 1938 Grand Central Palace exhibit), Stryker “was disappointed that Steichen had not selected any of what he called ‘the positive pictures.’ ‘Steichen’s approach,’ he said later, ‘was to show misery in its finest hour.... The [view]point was “The Bitter Years” and that is what was shown.’”55 The “positive pictures” include a fair number of FSA images of poor, rural Americans who were trying to improve their lives. The subjects of these photographs were FSA clients, people who had received loans or other help from the FSA. Their pictures might, therefore, be considered propaganda,