but, if so, it was very mild propaganda. The photographers did not try to show that the FSA clients became middle-class citizens or that their lives were drastically changed for the better by the New Deal. Indeed, in what is probably one of the best-known pictures of FSA clients—Lee’s photograph of a couple sitting by their radio in Hidalgo, Texas—the couple’s own efforts to look more prosperous and middle class than they really are makes them seem pathetic and a little comic. Though they have managed to furnish their living room with certain middle-class amenities (a painting on velvet of an eighteenth-century scene and a huge radio) and though they have posed themselves like people in a *Saturday Evening Post* advertisement, they are obviously plain country people; and since this is an honest, documentary photograph it contains the tell-tale signs of their recent poverty—their battered, worn-out shoes and a huge hole in one of the man’s socks. Images like Rothstein’s pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Andy Bahain of Kersey, Colorado, are considerably more typical. Lee photographed the Hidalgo people surrounded by the appurtenances of 1930s consumerism, but the Bahains proudly posed themselves standing by a huge tree and holding the crops they raised themselves—potatoes, corn, tomatoes, and a watermelon. Whether intended or not, the symbolism of the Bahain’s picture is touching and convincing: an American farmer and his wife have survived droughts, hard times, and the depression and are now enjoying the results of their own hard work on their own land. Jack Delano’s 1941 photograph of a black man—an “FSA borrower” in Greene County, Georgia, who is playing an accordion—is another convincing image of FSA success. Even though the man’s house has an unpainted plank floor and whitewashed plank walls, it is neat and clean, and there are curtains in the window.

Corn and tomatoes in Colorado, curtains in the windows of a black farmer in Georgia—these small signs of prosperity are very different from the Dick-and-Jane, consumer version of the American Dream visualized in the NAM billboards. These pictures of the FSA clients are probably the FSA photographers’ modest, frugal, but quite genuine version of the Dream; their illustrations of the kind of security possible for some poor Americans during the depression—thanks to a little help from their friends Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Rexford Tugwell, Roy Stryker, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, Jack Delano, John Vachon, Marion Post Wolcott, and Walker Evans. It was the American Dream as it was expressed by George and Lennie in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*—“a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs and . . . a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens,” or by a sign photographed in California in 1937: *LITTLE FARM W/ POULTRY, FRUIT AND VEGETABLES—YOU ARE SAFE.*

The FSA file also contains many positive pictures of places and people that were photographed simply because the photographers found them interesting—not because they were FSA clients. The photographers were not just, as one book later called them, “Crusaders with Cameras.” They were also travelers in a large and complicated country who were seeing and discovering many interesting, amusing, and enjoyable things. John Vachon was particularly eloquent about the joys of being an FSA photographer. “In western Nebraska I had my first glimpse of a part of the world
I came to love, the ecstatically magnificent Great Plains," he wrote about his first field trip in October of 1938.

I got inside dozens of farm houses (what a wonderful job I had: how else could I have ever been in a farmer's house in Red Willow County?), and I photographed the whole family sitting down to dinner. And there were the towns! I was twenty-four years old, and this was America before the Holiday Inn. Seneca, Kansas, had a hotel with a huge balustraded and polished staircase rising out of the lobby. I went to a church supper in the basement of the Methodist church. I saw ladies
quilting. . . . In North Platte, Nebraska, I met an ample forty-five-year-old blond lady who played the piano in a bar. Her name was Mildred, and she said she was a retired whore from Wichita. I told her I was a talent scout from Broadway, and her picture is in the File.\footnote{8}

Though these pictures represented the photographers' personal tastes and experiences to some extent, there also were certain patterns and a cultural significance to what they appreciated in the United States in the late 1930s. In particular, they seemed to have had an affinity for what might be described as American ways of living that were different from the bland, homogenized American Way celebrated on billboards. Their positive pictures usually contained images of regional cultures or eccentric, individual behavior; they usually celebrated work, not consumption; and they often emphasized the preindustrial, or "pioneer," qualities of life that still existed in many parts of the United States in the late 1930s. The NAM's images advertised a manufactured world, but the FSA photographers seemed to have been particularly interested in people who still produced homemade, handmade things. It was, in effect, that hotel in Seneca, Kansas, with its balustraded and polished staircase, versus the Holiday Inn; it was homebaked, whole wheat bread versus that bland, pulpy white bread sold in supermarkets all over the country.

As Warren Susman pointed out, the 1930s was a period when many Americans were particularly sensitive to the idea of culture as being a way of living rather than a fixed ideal or standard inherited from the past. Because of books like Robert and Helen Lynds' 1929 *Middletown* and Ruth Benedict's 1934 *Patterns of Culture*, they learned that "culture" did not necessarily have to refer to the "highest achievements . . . of intellect and art through history," but that it might refer to what Robert Lynd described as "all the things that a group of people inhabiting a common geographical area do, the ways they do things and the ways they think and feel about things, their material tools and their values and symbols."\footnote{59} The American middle-class culture of the 1930s, for instance, was characterized by the ownership of automobiles and radios, subscriptions to *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and enthusiasm for "Amos and Andy" and baseball. Inevitably, this American Way dominated the mass media and advertising. But these allegiances were only one particular set of "values and symbols," and during the 1930s some thoughtful Americans were interested in the values and behavior of other cultures that existed in both the United States and foreign nations.

Stuart Chase's *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* was published at the same time as Adams's *The Epic of America* and was almost as popular (11 printings between August 1931 and October 1932). Instead of giving his readers the usual sombrero-and-siesta stereotypes, Chase used the Lynds' *Middletown* and anthropologist Robert Redfield's *Tepoztlán* to contrast the ways of life that existed in Muncie, Indiana, (the Lynds' model for Middletown) and the Indian village that Redfield studied and Chase himself visited briefly during a trip through Mexico in 1930. Analyzing his own impressions and these two books "for a . . . serious study in comparative civilizations," Chase
contrasted the two cultures not to praise one at the expense of the other but to understand both better. "One can compare item by item the work habits, play habits, religious habits; the food, houses, clothing, education, social organization of two communities ... a whole world apart," he wrote. The one (in Mexico) "is still following the leisurely pattern of the handicraft age, with many cultural traditions from the greatest indigenous civilization which the Western Hemisphere produced; the other is firmly locked into the culture of the machine age, deriving most of its traditions and mores from the Eastern Hemisphere." The people of Tepoztlán had a very low standard of living, by industrialized Middletown's standards, Chase acknowledged. They had no telephones, bathtubs, or movies—but they had less mental illness, anxiety, and unemployment. And their culture still possessed its traditional crafts: the people could "put their hands to almost anything, fashion it, repair it, recreate it. Their popular arts, their weaving, pottery, glass work, basketry, are as authentic and delightful as any the modern or the ancient world has seen."60

The FSA photographers approached their subjects in a way that was essentially similar to Chase's, because in 1936 Stryker had given them all a shooting script based on suggestions made by Robert Lynd "for things which should be photographed as American Background." Many of Lynd's and Stryker's categories inherently stressed that different regions and economic classes of American citizens would have different ways of living. Backyards, wall decorations, and street scenes, for example, could all be photographed "as an index to ... different income groups." The rural and ethnic cultures the FSA photographers saw were not as isolated or as alien as the Mexican village that Chase visited, but the photographers seem to have found them almost equally fascinating. Like Chase, they seemed to be particularly interested in relatively traditional crafts, tools, and occupations.61

It would be impossible to describe all of the subjects that fascinated the photographers, but there were certain significant patterns and personal preferences. Blacksmiths, for example, seemed to be one of their favorite subjects; Rothstein, Post Wolcott, and Collier photographed them at work in places as different as Vermont, Mississippi, and New Mexico. Rothstein, who grew up in New York City and graduated from Columbia University, was particularly interested in ranching and sheep herding in the West; his photographs of cowboys and shepherders in places like Montana contained so many pristine skies that the other photographers joked that he "specialized in cumulus clouds." Vachon loved to photograph farming and ranching in Nebraska and the Dakotas. Evans seems to have been fascinated by folk art and what would now be considered vernacular architecture, and he made dozens of images of small, rural Southern churches, hand-painted signs, and nineteenth-century carpenter Gothic houses.62

The FSA photographers also had keen eyes for humorous, odd, and eccentric aspects of the "American Background." This is particularly noticeable in their images of hand-painted signs, including ones with picturesque misspellings, which they collected from all over the country. Lee, for example, met a man and woman in Louisiana who were "traveling evangelists, still preaching the gospel and sharpening
knives to pay for expenses after 25 years on the road," and he made a picture of them and their cart—which they pushed on foot—with its message, *REPELT YE SHALL ALL PERISH AND JESUS IS COMING SOON*. The most elaborate example of these folk signs was photographed near New Orleans by Vachon. He found a farmer named Emile Riche, who made a series of large, hand-painted signs proclaiming his autobiography and his side of a dispute with officials who had refused to pay him for damages to his property in a 1927 flood. Presumably pleased that Vachon was interested in his hand-painted narration, Riche painted another sign, with an image of Vachon and his camera on it and the caption: *I AM TAKING THE PHOTOGRAPHER OF DEPRESSION AND STARVATION AT ONCE*. (This was perhaps the only time that one of the FSA photographers was the subject of an image by a subject.)

It is important to realize, however, that these images did not contradict the hard-times photographs, but represented the amusing, vital, or worthwhile aspects of cultures or regions. In fact, in many instances the photographers made both kinds of photographs on the same assignments. Thus Evans might photograph the desperate poverty of tenant farm families in Alabama and then photograph rooms in their cabins for their aesthetic interest. Rothstein photographed Montana landscapes to emphasize their beauty, but he also photographed Butte and Meaderville to show how they had been blighted by copper mines and smelters. Collier and Post Wolcott made positive
photographs of blacksmiths at work in New Mexico and Mississippi but also photographed substandard schools in the same areas.

In some instances the FSA photographers’ interests in different cultures and other ways of life were searches for alternatives to the physical dreariness and moral squalor that characterized so much of life in the “civilized,” machine-age America and Europe of the 1930s and the early 1940s. Evans’s images of small-town houses and rural churches in his American Photographs, Lee’s pictures of Pic Town, New Mexico, in 1940, and Collier’s 1943 images of a rural Hispanic family are affirmations that contradict the sense of hopelessness W. H. Auden expressed in his poem, “September 1, 1939.” He bitterly described the 1930s as “a low dishonest decade” when “waves of anger and fear / Circulate over . . . the earth, / Obsessing our private lives” and “blind skyscrapers use / Their full height to proclaim / The strength of Collective Man.”64 The FSA photographers found some American places and people whose lives were not yet dominated by the “blind skyscrapers” and their power to control ideas, tastes, and feelings; and when they had the opportunity to photograph these subjects, they did so with great enthusiasm.

Evans seemed to have the most conscious distaste for the world of collective humanity, and he expressed this distaste quite clearly in his 1938 American Photographs. In 1934, a year before he joined the FSA, he was planning to do a picture book about what he disliked in America. “The right things can be found in Pittsburgh, Toledo, Detroit (a lot in Detroit, I want to get in some dirty cracks, Detroit's full of chances). . . . People, all classes, surrounded by bunches of the new down-and-out . . . Automobiles and the automobile landscape. . . . Architecture, American urban taste, commerce . . . the street smell, the hateful stuff, women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay.”65 Though it is possible to interpret the sequences of images in American Photographs in various ways, one of the most obvious aspects of his book's organization is that it is divided into two separate, carefully demarcated parts; Part One has most of the “hateful stuff.” Several of his FSA hardtimes images are in this part, and it also contains some fairly harsh urban scenes in New York and Havana and a number of chaotic, squalid interiors. There are a good many street photographs, and many of the people in these pictures look anxious or tense: four middle-aged, middle-class New Yorkers sitting on a bench in the Bronx and glaring in different directions at the world around them; a young couple in a roadster staring anxiously at the photographer; and a middle-aged American Legionnaire in Pennsylvania looking suspiciously at the camera. If, as Kirstein claimed, this part is the “physiognomy of a nation,” then it is a tense, anxious nation filled with contradictions and disintegrations.66 The sequence of the images—which was deliberate, according to Kirstein—is not based on chronology or geography, and often seems consciously intended to be jumbled and unsettling. Considering the images as “pairs,” the first image often seems to be eroded or disintegrated by the one immediately following it. For example, an intense portrait of an old black man in Cuba, his face seamed by age and work, is followed by an image of a minstrel show poster filled with silly racist stereotypes—blacks strumming banjos, stealing chickens, and waving
razors. Part One ends with a series of three hard-times pictures, which Evans did not do for the FSA: a ruined Louisiana plantation house and two squalid pictures of unemployed men and derelicts on South Street in New York City.

Part Two presents a more serene and positive view. It begins with a series of images of industrial and factory towns dominated by row and company housing (the regimented world of "Collective Man") but then escapes to a long concluding sequence of images of individualistic, serene, and even elegant buildings in rural areas and small towns, and in New Orleans. The oppressive sense of regimentation that characterizes the company towns at the beginning of Part Two is replaced by a sense of delightful diversity as Evans discovers all kinds of buildings, each of which has its own subtle virtues. The result is a visual pastoral symphony, which Kirstein described eloquently as Evans's celebration of "the continuous fact of an indigenous American expression...whether in sculpture, paint or architecture: that native accent we find again in Kentucky mountain and cowboy ballads, in the compositions Stephen Foster adapted from Irish folk-song and in contemporary swing-music."  

We see this same appreciation of a vernacular and indigenous American culture, outside the mainstream of urban and industrial life, in Lee's 1940 photographs of Pie Town, New Mexico, which were published as a photoessay in *U.S. Camera* in 1941. Many of the inhabitants of Pie Town, a community of 250 families, were refugees from the Dust Bowl who arrived in New Mexico in 1935 and had the good luck—or the good sense—to try homesteading instead of migrant work in California. Most of the homesteaders arrived "without any money," Lee said. "Usually they brought their kids, their personal belongs, some furniture, and some family heirlooms, in cars that barely made the grade." But settled families helped newcomers get started. Everyone worked hard and cooperated, a point Lee emphasized heavily throughout the photoessay; and by 1940, Pie Town had a church, a farm bureau, a school in the farm bureau building, a literary society, square dances, and community sings and picnics.  

Pie Town, however, did not have a very high "standard of living." The community was very isolated. Its main contact with the outside world was a Plymouth sedan that functioned as a daily stagecoach. It was sixty-five miles from the nearest railroad, twenty miles from a doctor or telegraph, and ten miles from the nearest telephone. Most of the people Lee photographed worked tremendously hard and had few, or no, luxuries visible in their homes. "It isn't an easy life we've got here," one farmer told Lee, and because of the short growing season "we don't have too much to do with. We came without money, we've had to grub and clear our land... But we don't go hungry, that's one thing."  

Before they arrived in New Mexico, many of the homesteaders were sharecroppers and renters. But given land, even desert land, they showed that they could recreate pioneer living conditions and "values." ("For the first time in their lives these people own their land and they feel they've a future here," one of them said.) Pie Town, Lee wrote, was "unique because it is a frontier town very much after the pattern of frontier towns a hundred years ago: a photographic survey... was particularly important because to some extent it... enables Americans of today to understand the pioneers
who have pushed westward for more than three hundred years, doggedly, ingeniously, humbly, and yet heroically, conquering a continent, making it fruitful for generations to come... We could picture the frontier which has unalterably molded the American character and make frontier life vivid and understandable. However, unlike many of the 1930s painters who portrayed frontier life in post office murals, or the Hollywood directors who depicted it in movies, Lee was not concerned with the "simplicity," the violence, or the excitement of frontier life but instead with the complexity of its development.

In particular, his pictures of the Pie Towners at work sought to show the different stages of the process through which they became more settled, comfortable, and secure. Some homesteaders, the newest arrivals, lived in dugouts, others lived in log cabins, and "old-timers" lived in sizable houses made of sawed boards. Lee was able to photograph, in great detail, all the stages of building a dugout and the ways in which log cabins were constructed. In addition, he photographed different kinds of agricultural tools, which ranged from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries in their technology. "In the early days we made our own farming tools," an old settler told Lee. "We've made our own plows; constructed harrows by driving spikes through piñon poles tied together. We used burros a lot for power." Lee photographed one homesteader, Jack Whinery, who still plowed walking behind a plow he made by hand, which was pulled by two burros. Another homesteader, Faro Caudill, was still clearing land by "grubbing" out rabbit bush with a pickax, but Caudill planted his fields on a two-wheeled riding plow pulled by two horses. Behind this plow was a block of wood which, as it dragged over the ground, smoothed the soil after planting; Lee carefully photographed this homemade device, presumably to show Caudill's ingenuity. Two other farmers, who were not named, used a cut-down truck as a tractor to pull their plow—one drove the truck while the other sat on the riding plow. (In his U.S. Camera caption for this picture, Lee commented, "pioneering requires ingenuity and cooperation.") But George Hutton, Jr., another Pie Town farmer, had a new tractor that could plow, plant, and cover two furrows of beans at a time. This particular development, from Whinery's homemade plow to Hutton's modern tractor, also illustrated, though Lee did not emphasize it, how relatively fragile the frontier way of life was, how its culture and values could be diminished by the "progress" represented by Hutton's tractor. That tractor, manufactured by a factory in Michigan or Illinois, made many skills and much ingenuity redundant. Hutton was "one of the few farmers in this section who farms with a tractor," Lee said in his notes. But seeing how well that tractor fits into the American Dream of productivity and progress, we wonder how much longer the Pie Towners continued to rely on burros and horses for power, how much longer they needed to rely on ingenuity and cooperation to help one another, and how much longer it would be before Pie Town had electricity and replaced its all-day community sings with radios and record players.

As these Pie Town pictures indicate, the FSA photographers were very interested in cultures that were alternatives to the mainstream, middle-class American way of life of the 1930s, but they did not photograph these subjects in a simplistic, nostalgic, or
static way. Instead, like Lee, they seemed to be intrigued by the complexities and the social dynamics of the communities they photographed.

One of the best ways they could show the mixed, changing qualities of American life was by photographing billboards, posters, and signs. Stryker pointed out that signs were interesting to documentary photographers because they revealed "contrasts" and
"mental attitudes." Thus Lange illustrated one of her chief interests, the increasing mechanization of rural life, with an image of a dilapidated ox cart going past an Alabama Ford garage and its billboard saying ALL SIGNS POINT TO FORD V-8. Post Wolcott was amused by, and photographed, the mixture of the sacred and the secular on a pine tree in Greene County, Georgia. It had commercial signs for GREEN SPOT ORANGE-ADE and INTERNATIONAL FERTILIZERS tacked to its trunk beneath a carefully hand-painted, wooden sign asking, DOST THOU BELIEVE ON THE SON OF GOD. Lee, traveling through a small oil town in New Mexico, managed to photograph a group of signs advertising a wonderful jumble of cultural attitudes and interests all on the same sandy, vacant lot: OIL LEASES AND ROYALTIES, CHURCH OF GOD 1 BLOCK, PENTECOSTAL CHURCH 4 BLOCKS, and a commercial poster for a movie called "White Zombie."

Evans's images often seem to have the clearest emphasis on the aesthetic qualities that could be perceived in the odd mixtures existing between different eras and aspects of American cultures in the 1930s. In many cases he seemed fascinated by scenes and buildings that expressed casual, almost surrealistic, juxtapositions of different historical periods and attitudes. In 1936 in Charleston, South Carolina, for example, he photographed the grimy storefront of a building housing the Plenge Chemical company, decorated with assorted pseudoclassical architectural decorations and pasted over with posters for a circus. Fifty miles away, in Beaufort, South Carolina, he photographed another building with signs proclaiming that it was an art school and a fish company, sold fruits and vegetables, had a public stenographer, and that GENERAL LAFAYETTE SPOKE FROM THIS PORCH 1824. His 1935 picture of the interior of a West Virginia coal miner's house emphasized the juxtaposition of a handmade rocking chair constructed of bent saplings with commercial posters—advertising a Coca-Cola Santa Claus and graduation gifts from a Rexall drug store—that the miner used to decorate his house. The unknown craftsperson who made the chair is not in the picture, but that person's way of life is represented by the chair and contrasted with the modern values symbolized by the commercial posters. Such images may not have illustrated hard times particularly well, but they did express—as well as any photographs can—the strange mixtures of times, activities, and cultural influences that mingled and jostled with one another in the FSA photographers' America.74

As these images imply, times change; and so did the FSA Historical Section. Considered strictly as a government institution, Stryker's photography unit was not exactly a long-term success. When the Farm Security Administration was organized in 1937, it was inspired by a sense of idealism as well as urgency. In his special message to Congress urging it to establish the agency, Roosevelt warned, "The American dream of the family-size farm, owned by the family that operates it, has become more and more remote. The agricultural ladder, on which an energetic young man might ascend from hired man to tenant to independent owner, is no longer serving its purpose."75 Moreover, this rural version of the American Dream was based not only on the
likelihood that farmers could own their own land but also on the assumption that this possession of land would make them free and independent citizens. As a nineteenth-century New England poet claimed about his native state, Connecticut,

"Tis a rough land of earth, and stone, and tree,
Where breathes no castled lord or cabined slave;
Where thoughts, and tongues, and hands are bold and free,

They love their land, because it is their own,
And scorn to give aught other reason why;
Would shake hands with a king upon his throne,
And think it kindness to his majesty."

For many Americans one of the most disturbing aspects of the farm crisis, which started in the 1920s and continued throughout the 1930s, was that all over the country poor farmers, drought victims, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers, in addition to living in terrible poverty, were losing their independence. According to Edwin Embree, writing in the Survey Graphic in 1936, the two million tenant families (over 8.5 million people) farming cotton in the South were living in "conditions bordering on peonage. . . . Economically they are at a bare subsistence level; mentally and morally they
are dependents, without control over their own destinies, with little chance for self-respect or the exercise of individual responsibility." Many of these tenant farmers were also second-class citizens because they could not vote—either because they were black or because they could not afford to pay poll taxes. In 1936 and 1937 it still seemed possible that these conditions might change, and Embree outlined an ambitious program based on "the suggestions advanced almost unanimously by students of farm problems, southern statesmen and government officials," which would have resettled landless farmers if "the federal government [would] . . . buy up huge acreages of farm lands now in the hands of insurance companies, land banks and others, and distribute this land in small plots of minimum size required to support farm families." Besides this massive land reform effort, Embree proposed that the government could set up service agencies to give homesteaders advice, seeds, and fertilizer, and it would also set up a variety of "carefully directed types of communities," including cooperative farm colonies.77

Though the Resettlement and Farm Security administrations did make some modest efforts to give land to homesteaders and to establish farm colonies and cooperatives, and though Stryker's photographers dutifully photographed those efforts, they were considered too expensive and much too controversial to be attempted on a large scale. By 1939 Paul Taylor, who was Dorothea Lange's husband and one of the nation's leading agricultural economists, admitted that because of mechanization and low crop prices it would be impossible to keep many poor farmers on the land. "It is plain that with advances in agricultural techniques, the country requires fewer farmers. . . . The real opportunity for large-scale absorption of the displaced [farm families] must lie in the direction of industrial expansion, not in crowding them back on the land where already they are surplus." In fact, as Taylor and Lange tacitly admitted in *American Exodus*, some of the the FSAs own policies contributed to the "displacement" of the nation's poorest farmers, the sharecroppers: the agency gave loans and payments to landlords, who used the money to mechanize their farms and replace the tenants with tractors. "In '34 I had I reckon four renters and I didn't make any thing," one Oklahoma landlord told Lange. "I let 'em all go. . . . I bought tractors on the money the government give me and got shet o' my renters. . . . I did everything the government said—except keep my renters. The renters have been having it this way ever since the government come in. They've got their choice—California or WPA [Works Project Administration]."78 Back in Washington, some FSA administrators continued to battle for "the small farmer issue." The "lowest third" of the American farm population was not going to be abandoned entirely, but it was gradually accepted that a large number of these farmers and their families would end up living in cities and working in industries. To phrase the matter more cynically, the overseer would be replaced by the factory foreman, the sharecropper's shack by the ghetto tenement, and the plantation commissary by the neighborhood pawnshop.

The FSA photography unit might have been able to respond to this change in a constructive way and survive. Reading between the lines of Howe's sympathetic April 1940 article in the *Survey Graphic*, which was presumably based on interviews with
Stryker and his staff, it is clear that the unit had already begun to shift away from the hard-times photographs that dominated the 1938 Grand Central Palace exhibition. Though, Howe said, the FSA photographers' first objective was still "to tell people, through pictures, about the great human problem . . . of giving a decent break to the lowest third of our farm population," they had adopted another aim of making "a photographic record of rural America—a visual account of how America's farmers live." He described the unit's new aims, such as a plan to photograph various food-processing and retail operations affecting farm life, the exploration of techniques to use photography as a "tool for social research," the use of FSA images to illustrate books, and a plan to provide colleges with sets of photographs for economics and sociology courses. It also is clear from the FSA picture files that by 1939 and 1940 the photographers themselves were working on some important social issues not directly related to rural poverty. The file contains pictures of substandard schools, Rothstein's images of industries and their effects on the social and natural environment, and Lee's 1941 photographs of ghetto housing in cities like Chicago. Howe's article expressed constructive criticisms—that the pictures often needed better "caption material" and that some of them would be more effective if they were presented like photoessays in picture magazines—but it ended with a cautiously optimistic statement implying that the unit might survive because it "vividly demonstrated the value of the camera as [an] instrument of government."?

Three years after Howe wrote this article, however, the FSA photography unit was disbanded, and Stryker left government service to organize a public relations photography project for Standard Oil of New Jersey. Probably the most important single reason for this change was World War II. One month after Howe's article was published in 1940, the Germans invaded the Low Countries and France, many more Americans began to believe that the United States would inevitably be drawn into the war, and conservatives began to attack New Deal agencies like the FSA as "non-essential" to rearmament or the "war effort." "Under the influence of the American Farm Bureau Federation and the Cotton Council, two organizations that represented the interests of the large commercial farmers," F. Jack Hurley wrote, senators and congressmen like Kenneth McKellar, Harry Byrd, and Everett Dirksen began to attack the Department of Agriculture and the FSA and to demand huge cuts in their budgets. McKellar, for example, blamed the FSA for "promoting 'socialized medicine,' excessive spending on travel and publicity, wasting funds on 'no-account people' and refusing to liquidate 'useless and dangerous resettlement projects.'" For good measure he also claimed that the head of the FSA was "not far removed from being a Communist." Congress battled all through the summer of 1942 over appropriations for the Department of Agriculture and the FSA. The administrators of these agencies began to struggle with one another over money and reorganization plans, and in September of that year Stryker asked to have the photography unit transferred to the government's propaganda agency, the Office of War Information (OWI). (Earlier in 1942 he already began to "loan" photographers to the OWI for specific projects.)80

Even before he asked to have the Historical Section assigned to the OWI, however,
Stryker began to dilute the unit’s documentary principles. It is true that several of the photographers who are most frequently associated with the FSA’s hard-times images (Evans, Lange, and Rothstein) left the unit between 1937 and 1940. As Howe pointed out, though, the photographers who joined the unit between 1938 and 1940 (Vachon, Delano, and Post Wolcott) had studied the pictures of the earlier photographers, particularly Walker Evans and Ben Shahn; the FSA files contain many images by them almost as bleak and bitter as the classic hard-times photographs exhibited at the Grand Central Palace in 1938. (For example, there are Vachon’s 1940 pictures of bad housing in Dubuque, Iowa, Post Wolcott’s 1939 and 1940 pictures of plantation and migrant worker families, and Delano’s 1940 pictures of FSA clients and farm workers.) Moreover, the captions on many of these pictures indicate that the photographers were well aware that the New Deal, the FSA, and the WPA had not yet ended the nation’s hard times and that many Americans were still suffering from disease, poverty, substandard housing, and bad schools.

By the autumn of 1940, Stryker asked for a very different kind of picture of American life. In a September 1940 memo to Delano, who was leaving for a field trip to New England, Stryker told him to watch out for “Autumn” pictures and “emphasize the idea of abundance—the ‘horn of plenty’ and pour maple syrup over it—you know: mix well with white clouds and put [it] on a sky-blue platter. I know your damned photographer’s soul wither, but to hell with it. Do you think I give a damn about a photographer’s soul with Hitler at our doorstep? You are nothing but camera fodder to me.” Delano said he considered this memo an example of Stryker’s sense of humor and did not take it too seriously. At any rate, even when he and the other FSA photographers were making their hard-times pictures they occasionally made what they called “America the Beautiful” pictures when they saw attractive landscapes.

By early 1942, however, when the United States was at war, Stryker gave his photographers even more specific directions about the reassuring propaganda pictures that he wanted. He ended a long February 1942 memorandum listing the photographs of industry and agriculture he needed with a demand:

People—we must have at once [emphasis Stryker’s]:
Pictures of men, women and children who appear as if they really believed in the U.S. Get people with a little spirit. Too many in our file now paint the U.S. as an old person’s home and that just about everyone is too old to work and too malnourished to care much what happens. (Don’t misunderstand the above. FSA is still interested in the lower income groups and we want to continue to photograph this group.) We particularly need young men and women who work in our factories, the young men who build our bridges, roads, dams and large factories. . . . More contented-looking old couples—woman sewing, man reading . . . coming from church; at picnics, at meetings.

The FSA photographers had documented harsh realities about the depression in the 1930s that were not clichés and that genuinely disturbed many people. Now, despite his claim that the FSA was still interested in the lower income groups, Stryker asked
them to make images that were essentially propaganda, to illustrate popular, reassuring clichés about America: that there were plenty of young men available to work in factories and build bridges, that old people were contented and secure, and so forth.

This situation became worse after the unit came under the control of the OWI, and Vachon later commented bitterly that “We photographed shipyards, steel mills, aircraft plants, oil refineries, and always the happy American worker. The pictures began to look like those from the Soviet Union.” The extent of this change is illustrated by Vachon’s own, March 1943 image of a Gulf Oil billboard. Three years earlier in Dubuque, he made ironic photographs of the NAM billboards, but his 1943 image shows the Gulf billboard beside a substantial, middle-class house, illustrating what was called the “defense motive” in advertising; that is, corporations’ efforts to sell their products through an appeal to patriotism. It was indeed, as the Gulf sign said, TIME TO CHANGE.

The increasing use of FSA images for propaganda purposes is also shown by the changes in their main exhibits. The 1938 Grand Central Palace exhibit consisted of hard-times images that contradicted the NAM’s claims that American was so prosperous and successful. In 1941 the FSA’s exhibit, shown at Rockefeller Center, was called The Way of a People, a slogan very similar to the NAM’s. The exhibit was filled with optimistic images showing that the United States was strong, healthy, and prosperous—and implying that all this strength could be transformed into military might. The 1942 Road to Victory exhibit, as one would expect of a show coming right after Pearl Harbor, was fervently patriotic. It was shown at the Museum of Modern Art and mounted by Steichen, who was a lieutenant commander in the navy. It consisted of combinations of enlarged FSA images (all very positive), and navy publicity pictures of fighter planes, bombers, and warships.

Even though the FSA photographers’ images, arranged and captioned appropriately, could be used for propaganda purposes, the photographers themselves did not seem very interested in making the hard-core propaganda pictures so popular in the American mass media during the war. For instance, when Russell Lee and Dorothea Lange were assigned to photograph the Japanese-Americans interned in camps in the West in 1942, they were extremely sympathetic to the Japanese and portrayed them as such decent people and loyal Americans that their pictures look like an indictment of the U.S. government’s actions: this was so even though both of them were working for the government at the time—Lee as a member of the FSA, and Lange as an employee of the War Relocation Authority. Lee photographed two Japanese-Americans respectfully holding an American flag in their camp in Idaho. Lange photographed a Japanese-American schoolchild saying the Pledge of Allegiance in San Francisco; one of her pictures was used to illustrate a pamphlet printed by a Quaker group that opposed the internment of the Japanese-Americans, much to the annoyance of the military authorities in charge of the camps.

Nor, despite his earlier, patriotic memos about “camera fodder,” did Stryker seem to be happy administering a photo service for propaganda pictures. The Selective Service began to draft his photographers, he fought with the other OWI administra-
tors, and he became convinced that the OWI wanted to “dismember” the FSA files that he had built up. After winning a final bureaucratic struggle to save the FSA prints and negatives by placing them under the control of the Library of Congress, he resigned from the government in September 1943 and began working for Standard Oil.\textsuperscript{87}

Despite the relatively short life span of Stryker’s photography unit as a government agency, the long-term contribution of the FSA photographers to photography was extremely important. No one, with the possible exception of Lewis Hine, did more to make documentary photography a significant visual media. It is quite possible that, if the FSA photographers had not exhibited their hard-times photographs at the Grand Central Palace in 1938, documentary photography—in the United States, at least—might still be confined to the drab informational and public relations pictures illustrating textbooks and gathering dust in the files of corporations and government agencies. But this contribution did not reach fruition for nearly two decades, because documentary photography suffered an eclipse during the 1940s and the 1950s. As Howe and Hurley pointed out, in the late 1930s and the early 1940s not only newspapers and
magazines published the FSA photographs, but authors and editors also began to use them to illustrate serious books such as Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free*, Herman Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*, Lange and Taylor's *American Exodus*, Agee and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town*, and Rosskam and Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices*. But the use of these photographs stopped during World War II, when American photography began to be dominated by photojournalism. Magazines were filled with dramatic combat and propaganda pictures and, after the war, with equally dramatic images of atomic bomb explosions, concentration camp corpses, war crimes trials, and the beginnings of the cold war. Moreover, the media, instead of drawing attention to the problems of ordinary people, were busy emphasizing how such people could contribute to the war effort. When the war ended, these media were filled with images of a devastated Europe and Japan, which made the United States' problems—such as strikes, racial tensions, and the housing shortage—seem relatively mild.

The nadir of the FSA photography unit's reputation came in 1948, when *Life* magazine regaled its millions of readers with a two-page spread illustrating conservative Indiana Senator Capehart's claims that the FSA wasted $750,000 of the government's money on "silly" and "ridiculous" pictures. The article mentioned that the FSA photography unit also produced "some excellent documentary work" during the depression, and it praised a dull picture of a New England church as a "sample of better FSA work" that was "useful in propaganda work abroad during the war." But *Life* illustrated the story with a series of trivial pictures selected by Capehart, and it did not include any of the "excellent documentary" images. When the American Society of Magazine Photographers denounced *Life*'s portrayal of the FSA in an editorial in its newsletter, one of the magazine's staff members apologized, claiming that any "criticism, such as it was, was by implication directed at Senator Capehart," and that any file as large as the FSA file "will have some turkeys in it." But the letter did not explain why the magazine printed so many "turkeys" to illustrate Capehart's criticisms; nor did it explain why *Life* relied on the senator for its selection of FSA prints at a time when two of the original FSA photographers—Walker Evans and Carl Mydans—were on the staffs of *Fortune* and *Life*.

Moreover, in the late 1940s it began to be unpopular and even risky to criticize the American way of life or the country's domestic and foreign policies, except for partisan political purposes. Persons who did that were frequently accused of being subversives, fellow travelers, or Communists. Drama critic Harold Clurman commented in 1961 that, during the 1950s, America was "prosperous and relatively strong; it was sinful to rock the boat; that is, to do anything that might weaken our confidence or prestige as a world power. . . . McCarthyism became the chilling emblem that frightened and froze us into a tense dumbness. We dared never suggest—no matter what the provocation—that we were not living in the best of all possible worlds. If a peep of protest issued from your lips, you were thought a crank or a neurotic, if not actually subversive." For the photographers, the clearest warning came in 1947, when the Photo League was placed on the attorney general's list as a subversive organization. Even though the
League was defended against this charge by its leaders and members, which included eminent photographers like Strand, Lange, Eugene Smith, Edward Weston, Barbara Morgan, Eliot Elisofon, and Ansel Adams, it was disbanded in 1951 because many of the other photographers were afraid of being blacklisted.⁹¹

In such a political and cultural atmosphere, there were very few editors or agencies who would risk publishing or sponsoring photographers who wanted to deal with controversial subjects or with “what had gone wrong” with America. Marion Palfi, a documentary photographer, assigned herself during the late 1940s and the 1950s to photographing the same types of subjects that the FSA and the Photo League photographers did in the 1930s and the early 1940s: abandoned children in public institutions, racism in Georgia, the problems of elderly people, and the consequences—all of them bad—of the government’s policy of “terminating” Indian reservations and making their inhabitants enter mainstream white culture. Even though Palfi was a capable and courageous photographer, no private foundations or government agencies would give her any support, no one would exhibit her images, and no one would publish them until 1971, when Lee Witkin managed to arrange an exhibit and publish an exhibition booklet entitled, appropriately, Invisible in America.⁹²

By the 1960s, however, more Americans were again brave enough to confront images of poverty in their nation. In 1962 the FSA photographers were the subjects of a major retrospective, The Bitter Years, organized by Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The show was widely praised: the prestigious Swiss photography magazine, Camera, devoted an entire issue to the FSA; the works of individual photographers were shown in exhibits and published in books and monographs; Stryker and the photographers were interviewed; and the FSA became the subject of a number of valuable studies by historians and critics of photography like F. Jack Hurley, William Stott, and Robert Doherty. In one of the best appreciations of the photography unit since Steichen’s and Howe’s 1938 and 1940 comments, Doherty recognized and summarized the significance of the FSA photography unit in Camera in 1962: “Candid honest documentation of life in a country, by the government of that country, is something seldom encountered. The inclination to rationalize the ills of an individual, a group, or a nation is far more prevalent than frank admission of reality. When documentation of the [condition] of a nation is executed...on the scale of the Farm Security Administration Project...it ranks of great importance in the history of photography.”⁹³

The photographers themselves were able to use what they learned from one another and Stryker to create successful careers for themselves in photography and communications after the FSA Historical Section was disbanded. Rothstein became director of photography, first at Look magazine and then at Parade. Evans became staff photographer at Fortune, and after he retired from that position he taught at Yale. Despite severe health and family problems in the 1940s, Lange returned to photography in the 1950s, when she did two important photoessays for Life, and she was the subject of a Museum of Modern Art retrospective. Delano worked on the Standard Oil project for Stryker, then went into television documentary production and became
director of the government's television service in Puerto Rico. Vachon also worked for Standard Oil and then for *Look*. Lee did documentary photography on coal miners after World War II, then did free-lance industrial photography and taught photography at the universities of Missouri and Texas. Evans, Vachon, and Lange received Guggenheim Fellowships.94

Despite these achievements and honors, several of the FSA photographers had difficulty making the hard-times documentary photographs that they did so brilliantly in the 1930s. If they did that type of photography, they did not receive much encouragement or support. When Russell Lee was living and teaching in Texas in 1960, for example, the University of Texas was delighted with his proposal that he make a photographic tour of Italy. He received a grant of $1,000 toward his travel expenses, and 150 of his photographs were published by the University's *Texas Quarterly* in 1961. On the other hand, when he decided that it would be worthwhile to make a major photographic study of the “living conditions and health problems” of Spanish-speaking people in Texas in 1950, he received a small grant from the University and traveled to several Texas cities, including Corpus Christi, where “he found a physician . . . who allowed him to go along on his daily rounds through the ‘barrios.’ . . . The living conditions reminded Lee of the worst situations he had encountered back in the depression.” But it seems that this study, Hurley wrote in 1978, “has never been published,” and “one is led to speculate that the Texas power structure still had use for cheap ‘bracero’ labor in 1950 and was able to exert enough pressure on the University of Texas” to make sure that Lee’s pictures remained unseen.95

Lee’s solution to this problem was, in effect, to use the income he received from his teaching and free-lance industrial photography to subsidize his documentary photography. He made photographic studies of the conditions in Texas state institutions for the elderly and the criminally insane and for a small news magazine, *The Texas Observer*, even though the *Observer* only paid him five dollars per print used, because he felt “what the hell, I mean, it was work that just had to be done.” He made a photographic study at a center for retarded children in Austin, printed the pictures at his own expense, and arranged an exhibit for the school because, as he explained to Hurley, “I just did this sort of thing on my own because these people had no funds to compensate a photographer.”96

The case of Walker Evans’s career after he left the FSA is sadder and more complicated. On the one hand, he seemed to be the FSA photographer most concerned that his photographs not be considered “propaganda” or “political.” When he accepted his appointment with the Historical Section, he made a note to himself. “Mean never [to] make photographic statements for the government . . . this is pure record not propaganda.” He told an audience of Harvard students many years later, “I do have a critical mind...but I am not a social protest artist, although I have been taken as one very widely . . . You’re not—and shouldn’t be, I think—trying to change the world . . . saying, ‘Open up your heart, and bleed for these people.’ I would never dream of saying anything like that. . . . I believe in staying out, the way Flaubert does in his writing.” As this comment indicates, Evans was fascinated by Flaubert, and he
believed he unconsciously incorporated many of the novelist's aesthetic ideas and techniques into his own work.97 It seems possible that he wanted to be a photographic Flaubert, a seemingly disengaged, objective artist who rigorously criticized his society's illusions yet never "lowered" himself to the status of a "protest" artist.

On the other hand, judging from some of his statements in talks and interviews in the 1970s after he retired from *Fortune*, Evans had some strong social feelings. He left the United States and became an expatriate in France in 1926 and 1927, he said, because "at that time, America was scandalously materialistic and really fascist, and so awful that we just had to get the hell out of it. . . . I was really anti-American at the time. America was big business and I wanted to escape. It nauseated me. . . . It was a hateful society, and that embittered all people of my age. . . . [The Wall Street Crash] was certainly coming, and that awful society damn well deserved it. I used to jump for joy when I read of some of those stock brokers jumping out of windows!"98 Traveling in the South for the FSA probably was very stimulating for Evans because it gave him a vision of a reality (he called it "old" or "regional America") that was an alternative to big business and the country's mainstream culture in the 1920s. "I was dedicated to making pictures with that camera," he later told an interviewer about his work in the South. "I couldn't stop doing it. . . . I had to do it. And I was terribly excited by all sorts of things that I saw, and attracted naturally, almost by heritage and by birth, to regional America."99

After he left the FSA in 1938, Evans did free-lance work for several years and in 1943 joined Time-Life, Inc., first as a writer for *Time* magazine and then, in 1945, as the only full-time photographer on the staff of *Fortune*—a magazine read by many stockbrokers and filled with idealized images of big business and portraits of executives, rather than sharecroppers. Interestingly enough, it was *Fortune*'s editors in 1936 who commissioned Agee and Evans to go to Hale County, Alabama, as part of a series of documentary studies of ordinary Americans, to research and photograph the subjects that later became *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. (They found Agee's prose and Evans's images too disturbing to publish, even in the depression.) After Evans became the magazine's staff photographer in 1945, he did not make any more disturbing or hard-times images until 1961, when he made "People and Places in Trouble," a portfolio of strong, concise, black-and-white pictures of unemployed people in the eastern United States who were living "in pockets of new unemployment and old poverty." In the interval between 1945 and 1961, he did a great many other portfolios for *Fortune*, which are quite bland and often dull. Since many of these dealt with architecture, it is possible to be charitable and say that he was trying to be an American Atget, since—like Atget—he often photographed old buildings and sites about to be demolished.100

A less charitable and more psychological interpretation of Evans's work of the 1940s and the 1950s, including his *Fortune* portfolios, would point out that—contrasted to the magnificent pictures that he made in Hale County in 1936—these later pictures could easily be entitled, "The Alienated Photographer." Starting in New York in the early 1940s, he began photographing people on subways with a hidden camera,
and he made a similar series in downtown Detroit in 1946, in which unidentified people, all seen from the same angle, marched past his camera, unconscious of the fact that they were being photographed. In the 1950s people disappeared almost completely from his images. The government buildings of "Imperial Washington" (1952), the railroad stations of "The U.S. Depot" (1953), the chairs and desks in "Vintage Office Furniture" (1953), the old factories of "These Dark Satanic Mills" (1956), and the old buildings in lower Manhattan in "Downtown, A Last Look Backward" (1956) are all totally empty—except for a few shiny automobiles in a parking lot in "Imperial Washington" and one tiny man who is barely visible by a bridge in that portfolio. In a decade when his contemporaries (Strand, Lange, Lee) were photographing Frenchmen, Egyptians, and Italians in their homes and villages, Evans was photographing America from train windows in "The Right of Way," and the logos on old boxcars in "Before They Disappear." Evans could still make good modernist art photographs, and in 1955 he did " Beauties of the Common Tool," a series of studio pictures of ordinary tools. It was the sort of conventional, rather antiseptic modernist photography that Strand, Scheeler, Steiner, and Albert Renger-Patzsch did in the 1920s. Considered as a comment on what had happened to Evans's own creativity, a handwritten note he made about this 1955 portfolio is one of the sadder confessions by an American artist. "Time and again a man will stand before a hardware store window eyeing the tools arrayed behind the glass; his mouth will water; he will go in and hand over $2.65 for a perfectly beautiful special kind of polished wrench; and probably he will never, never use it for anything." Perhaps Evans also revealed his feelings about himself and what happened to his talents since he and Agee were in Alabama together when he met a younger photographer in 1955. "I once came to see Walker at the office at Fortune," the other photographer recalled. "It was when Agee had died. . . . Agee was his best friend, and I remember him just sitting on his desk in front of a window and looking down on Rockefeller Center . . . and he just sat there and he cried . . . . He came up to Nova Scotia about three years ago [in 1972]. . . . I took him to all the old houses—the people live just like in the thirties or forties in the States, and he was overjoyed. He photographed and photographed. And I liked to see him so happy . . . but at the same time, I felt that I wouldn't want to do that when I'm older." 106 The younger photographer who saw Evans crying in his office was Robert Frank—but that is another story and another chapter.

Unlike Evans, who almost entirely gave up making hard-times photographs until he did his "People and Places" portfolio in 1961, Dorothea Lange made a serious effort in the 1950s to bridge the gap that existed between the FSA documentary tradition and the mass-media photjournalism that dominated American photography in that decade. In the early 1950s Steichen began planning his 1955 Family of Man exhibit, which was, among other things, an attempt to create a synthesis between photjournalism and documentary photography. Thus he relied heavily for advice on Lange, on photographer Homer Page, who was one of Lange's close friends, and on his assistant, Wayne Miller, who spent months selecting pictures from Life's huge files. The resulting exhibit was dominated by photjournalism (Life was the largest single source of
pictures), but there were some prints from the FSA, including nine of Lange's; this may have encouraged her to try to make her own compromise between the concerns of the documentary tradition and the demands of the 1950s photojournalism marketplace.103

The results of her efforts were mixed. Her 1955 Life photoessay about poor, rural people in western Ireland was quite successful. The idea that foreigners might be poor but decent people, even though they did not drive Buicks or shop in supermarkets, was quite acceptable in the mass media of the 1950s. Life's editors printed Lange's images of farmers, schoolchildren, and craftspeople in a fairly long and well-designed photoessay. When they discovered that Lange and her son, who accompanied her, had not recorded all the names and clearances they needed, the editors sent two researchers to Ireland to find the people she photographed and collect the necessary information.104

The photoessay on Utah's small-town Mormons that she and Ansel Adams did for Life in 1954 was less successful, even though Maitland Edey later included it in Great Photographic Essays from Life. Lange and Adams were close friends, they collaborated on several earlier photographic projects, and they had an idea, which can be deduced from some of Life's text, that might have led to an impressive photoessay. Adams could photograph the "splendid but forbidding" Utah mountains and deserts near the three Mormon towns, and Lange could show how the people survived and created their own way of life. Unfortunately, Adams's images were a little too splendid for Life's presses; as Edey admitted, the magazine could "not begin to do justice" to his pictures, so it used only seven of them and twenty-seven of Lange's.105 Her contribution could have been—like Lee's photographs of Pie Town—a substantial photoessay showing how pioneer conditions, skills, and work habits were surviving in the twentieth-century in a harsh, isolated environment. But Life's editors arranged and captioned her pictures so they illustrated a common cliché: adopting mainstream American culture brings progress and prosperity, but the past remains as a nostalgic tourist attraction.

Life neatly stereotyped the three towns according to the degrees to which they supposedly adopted mainstream, "worldly" American values, and presented them in sequence. Toquerville, the town that changed the least, was presented as a kind of cemetery, pretty but almost empty because, though it had a "strong and enduring vision of Zion," it did not have a bank, movie house, motel, or neon signs. The second town, Gunlock, was presented in a more lively way since, as Life's captions emphasized, it was changing and being "assimilated" into the rest of the United States. The men had begun to go to nearby St. George to work for wages. St. George, the third town, "has taken up worldly ways," Life claimed, as it stressed the presence in the town of loan companies, motels, a drive-in movie theater, and tourists. Its representative citizen was a Mormon gentleman who was the town's "merchant, churchman, [and] owner of the town's first motel." "The Tourists Take Over Main Street," said another caption, with what may have been irony: the photograph shows a troop of people walking past a supermarket whose window signs advertise all the usual brand name products (Mazola Oil and Pillsbury Pancake Mix) advertised in Life. In other words,
now that the Mormons are a tourist attraction, what they have to offer are the exotic delights of Mazola Oil and the Stardust Motel’s neon sign. Nowhere in the photoessay were Mormons doing any of the farming or work that enabled them to “wrest a living from the desert” before the motels arrived—except for small pictures of a shovel and a man’s legs, a woman peeling corn, and another woman holding mason jars. Adams commented later that he and Lange gave the magazine “‘very handsome’ material, but ‘as so often occurred with such projects . . . it suffered from over-editing and loss of emotional drive.’” 

During 1956 and 1957, Lange also completed the photographs for two other photoessays intended for Life, but not published. This was not unusual in itself, since the magazine commissioned and paid retainers for many more projects than it could publish, and its files were filled with unpublished photoessays. In Lange’s case, however, it may have been significant that she did not make stereotyped images. In 1955 she did a photoessay called “Public Defender,” about a young Alameda County, California, Legal Aid lawyer and his penniless clients. She hoped that it would be published by Life for a May 1956 issue on Law Day. In her pictures she showed that the lawyer was concerned about the rights of his clients, even though most of them were poor people and petty criminals, and that he took their trials very seriously. As one would expect, when she photographed the defendants Lange “showed the same respect for their dignity” that she showed for “the dispossessed of the thirties.”

Life never published “Public Defender.” Instead, in the fall of 1957, it published “The Qualities of Justice,” a group of essays about the American legal and police system, as part of a series on “Crime in the U.S.” One of these photoessays dealt with Legal Aid and petty criminals. Unlike Lange, however, Life separated the Legal Aid lawyers from their clients, treating them separately in an essay illustrated by a group picture of the New York City Legal Aid staff. The magazine then, in a separate article, presented the nation’s poor criminals en masse, in a remarkably squalid manner. “‘Revolving Door’ Court,” a tabloid tour of the “lower depths,” was the sort of thing that journalists in London, Paris, and New York had done for decades to entertain their middle-class readers. Life illustrated it not with photographs but with dehumanizing, messy drawings made in courtrooms, which presented the criminals as sleazy grotesques. The captions gave only the most superficial kind of tabloid, police court data. (“A legless man arrested in Detroit for drunkenness, assures the judge, ‘If you let me go I’ll never be here again.’ He has a record of 51 previous arrests, 45 for being a ‘drunk person. He got 10 days.’) Even though Life solemnly noted that these “two million cases” dealing with the “also-rans of society” every year were “a major national problem,” it implied that these criminals were not worth much serious attention or concern, which is the opposite of what Lange conveyed in “Public Defender.”

In the last photoessay she tried to do for Life—which was interested enough to pay her a thousand-dollar retainer—Lange photographed the destruction of the fertile and prosperous Berryessa Valley, which was flooded to be a reservoir for California’s growing suburbs. Aided by a young photographer named Pirkle Jones, Lange recorded every stage of the valley’s destruction: the gathering of the final crops; the sale
and auction of farmers’ homes and belongings; the demolition of buildings; the clearing of stumps, trees, and brush by giant bulldozers; and even the disinterment of bodies from graveyards, to be re-buried on higher ground. The final pictures presented frightening images of desolation. One is of a terrified horse pawing the barren ground and another shows a monstrous bulldozer tearing the land into dust. It was a vision of a fruitful world that became as desolate as the terrible dustbowl photographs that Rothstein made in Oklahoma and Kansas in the 1930s, but this desolation was caused by “progress,” not drought.

After they received Lange’s and Jones’s prints, Life’s editors prepared a layout, but instead of printing it they ran “articles on storms and floods . . . for several issues, and [then] the editors decided there had been ‘too many articles on water.’” The Berryessa Valley photographs were shelved. The magazine’s stories on floods and storms enabled them to stay safely within the cliché that the relationship between people and their environment is a struggle in which nature is the menace threatening human life and property—a much more conventional and less disturbing idea than the insights implied by Lange’s and Jones’s study. Aperture published the Berryessa prints in 1960 as a photoessay with the title, “Death of a Valley.” Minor White’s introduction to it was an accurate and intelligent interpretation of the images and events and contained some perceptions that would not have appeared in Life: “Under the swelling pressure of a skyrocketing birth rate, places for people to live and water for crops and factories has become critical . . . Bulldozers are only slightly slower than atomic bombs . . . [and] the nature of destruction is not altered by calling it the price of progress. To witness population inflation of such proportions that ways of life are uprooted, fruiting trees sawed down, productive land inundated, and bodies already buried forced out of the ground is to realize that as life teems so does death. And that man is the active agent of both.”

After Lange’s death in 1965, Eugene Smith, one of the best and most idealistic magazine photographers of his time, wrote an elegy for her in Popular Photography. He praised Lange’s “Public Defender” and “Death of a Valley,” and said it was “a downright crime . . . that the largest and most influential publications of our time have made so little use of her reportorial ability, that they have realized so little from her reportorial accomplishments.” It was an elegy not only for Lange personally but also for her efforts to create an honorable synthesis between the insights of serious, documentary photography and the exigencies of mass-media photojournalism. By the time she died, a later generation of documentary photographers who had been inspired by the FSA photographers were finding new ways of reaching an audience—and Life magazine was not one of them.
American Photography and the American Dream

James Guimond

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