

Artists: Dorothea Lange

By Library of Congress, National Archives and National Park Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.05.17

Word Count **1,105**



Photographer Dorothea Lange atop a Ford Model C automobile on Route 66 in California in 1936. The camera in her hands is her trusty Graflex 5x7 Series D. Photo provided by the Library of Congress.

Synopsis: Photographer Dorothea Lange was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895. Lange is best known for her work documenting the poor conditions of the migrant workers who traveled in large numbers to California during the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. Her photographs brought much-needed attention to their plight. Lange used photography to document the difficult period of the Depression and to motivate people to take action to improve the situation. With her photographs, she was able to capture the emotional and physical toll that the Depression and other events took on human beings across the country. Lange died in San Francisco, California, in 1965.

Early Life

When Dorothea Lange was 7 years old, she contracted polio, a disease that caused her to walk with a limp. Her father abandoned the family when Dorothea was 12, and her mother went to work, first as a librarian and then as a social worker. Dorothea attended school in New York City, where she saw many people who were poor and homeless. Her illness, the abandonment by her father, and the people she observed in New York may have helped her understand some of the suffering of the people she would later photograph.

Apprentice Photographer

Lange decided at 18 that she wanted to be a photographer and began learning the skill through classes at Columbia University. After apprenticing with a photographer in New York City, she moved to San Francisco and in 1919 established her own studio. During the 1920s and early 1930s, Lange worked as a portrait photographer, usually for San Francisco's upper classes. She did not consider photography to be an art form, although today many of her pictures hang in museums. At the time, many people thought of photography as merely a record of events.

Although Lange could not see the "art" in her pictures, her work has many of the same features as a painting. She captured not only images of people, but also the conditions in which they lived. Like many paintings, Dorothea Lange's photographs tell a story, often sending a powerful social message. In San Francisco, as the Great Depression began to unfold, Lange brought her giant camera out of the studio and onto the streets. She captured pictures of the homeless and unemployed in San Francisco's breadlines, labor demonstrations, strikes by waterfront workers and soup kitchens.

The Power Of Dorothea Lange's Pictures

Migrant family walking on road, pulling belongings in carts and wagons. Pittsburg County, Oklahoma. June 1938. Taken by Dorothea Lange; thanks to The Library of Congress

Lange's work in San Francisco led her to take a job with the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The FSA was a government group created during the Depression to fight rural poverty. It helped farmers resettle on group lands that were more suitable for farming than the drought-plagued lands many farmers were toiling on and trying to escape.

For the FSA, Lange took pictures of migrant farm workers, sharecroppers and displaced families. This was during the period known as the "Dust Bowl," between 1930 and 1940, when the Great Plains region of the United States suffered a severe drought. Lange's images earned her a reputation as a social documentary photographer.

"Migrant Mother" is one of a series of photographs that Dorothea Lange made of Florence Owens Thompson and her children in 1936 in California. Click photo to enlarge.

Lange's most famous photograph, commonly known as the "Migrant Mother," was taken in 1936. It shows a woman from Oklahoma named Florence Owens Thompson who worked in the pea fields of Nipomo, California, near Santa Barbara. The woman was a widow with seven children, who survived by eating frozen peas from the fields and birds her children caught. This photograph became a symbol of the suffering caused by the Depression. It was published in the San Francisco News and led to relief for the camp where the woman lived.

In 1960, Lange spoke about how she took the photo to Popular Photography Magazine:

I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

Lange And The Relocation Camps

After taking photos of people during the Depression, Lange turned her lens on another subject. The United States entered World War II in December 1941. In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order to create the War Relocation Authority, which forced Japanese-Americans to live in camps while America was at war with Japan.

Dorothea Lange was invited to photograph the camps, whose residents were "interned," or confined. Of the 10 internment camps that were established, two of the larger ones were in Arizona. Overall, more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans were interned from 1942 until 1946. Even though she was against the policy of imprisoning Japanese-Americans, Lange photographed the people in these camps and captured some of her most famous pictures.

Members of the Mochida family awaiting an "evacuation" bus. Identification tags were used to keep a family together during all phases of being sent to an internment camp. Mochida operated a nursery and five greenhouses on a two-acre site in Eden Township, California.¹ In 1942 the government ordered the removal of 110,000 civilians of Japanese descent, including 71,000 American citizens, from the western United States, placing them in internment camps. Photo by Dorothea Lange, Hayward, California, May 8, 1942.

Lange agreed to take photographs in the camps because she hoped that once people saw what was happening, the internment would stop. The idea that photographs could influence people to help others was a theme in almost all of Lange's work.

Lange's images of the camps were so compelling and so critical of the situation that the Army confiscated most of them. Lange visited 21 camps, but the Army also tried to restrict her. She wasn't allowed to speak with some detainees or photograph wire fences, watchtowers with searchlights, armed guards or any sign of resistance. Her photographs were seen by no one — including Lange herself — for almost 50 years.

Death And Legacy

Lange remained a documentary photographer until the end, traveling throughout the 1950s and 1960s to photograph various places around the world. She died of throat cancer on October 11, 1965, in San Francisco, California, at age 70.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "The Power Of Dorothea Lange's Pictures" that BEST describes Lange's approach to her photography.

- 2 Read the sentence from the section "Lange And The Relocation Camps."

The idea that photographs could influence people to help others was a theme in almost all of Lange's work.

Which sentence from the article BEST supports the statement above?

- (A) Her illness, the abandonment by her father, and the people she observed in New York may have helped her understand some of the suffering of the people she would later photograph.

 - (B) Like many paintings, Dorothea Lange's photographs tell a story, often sending a powerful social message.

 - (C) This photograph became a symbol of the suffering caused by the Depression.

 - (D) It was published in the San Francisco News and led to relief for the camp where the woman lived.
-
- 3 Read the selection from "Lange And The Relocation Camps."

Of the 10 internment camps that were established, two of the larger ones were in Arizona. Overall, more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans were interned from 1942 until 1946.

What is the MOST likely reason for including this information in the article?

- (A) to emphasize the size of the Japanese-American population during the war

- (B) to explain why Lange went to the internment camps to take photographs

- (C) to show where the most populated internment camps were located

- (D) to highlight how many people were affected by internment

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "The Power Of Dorothea Lange's Pictures."

Lange's work in San Francisco led her to take a job with the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The FSA was a government group created during the Depression to fight rural poverty. It helped farmers resettle on group lands that were more suitable for farming than the drought-plagued lands many farmers were toiling on and trying to escape.

Why does the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to develop additional information about life in San Francisco
- (B) to show why Lange's job was a good fit for her
- (C) to explain why the FSA needed a photographer on staff
- (D) to describe the government's solution to the drought