

# ASSIGNMENT

# T: AMERICA



Family reunion on front lawn on Sunday near Lawrenceburg, Kentucky, 1940, Marion Post Wolcott.



## ROVING PHOTOGRAPHERS CAPTURE EVERYDAY LIFE BEFORE WORLD WAR II

Eighty-five years ago, the Farm Security Administration was a pillar of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. A continuation and expansion of the Resettlement Administration (1935-37), the FSA aided farmers, sharecroppers and migrant workers—groups harmed by the twin disasters of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Because both programs involved some direct relief, political conservatives criticized them as “socialistic.”

Director Rexford Tugwell decided that the critics—and the country—needed to see government in action. He put Columbia University economics professor Roy Stryker in charge of recording the effects of relief programs. Beginning in 1935, Stryker's elite force of photographers traveled the nation to document the lives of thousands of Americans—a stunning, one-of-a-kind artistic achievement.

The agency's best-known image is Dorothea Lange's moving 1936 portrait of migrant Florence Thompson with three of her children. But the outsize fame Lange's picture enjoys has had the unfortunate result of obscuring the breadth of work done by all FSA photographers.

On the next few pages, we spotlight some of these exceptional artists—men and women who trekked through prairies and desert towns, up coal-country mountains and along southern bayous to show us who we were at an extraordinary point in our history.

by  
MARY-LIZ SHAW / photos and captions courtesy of  
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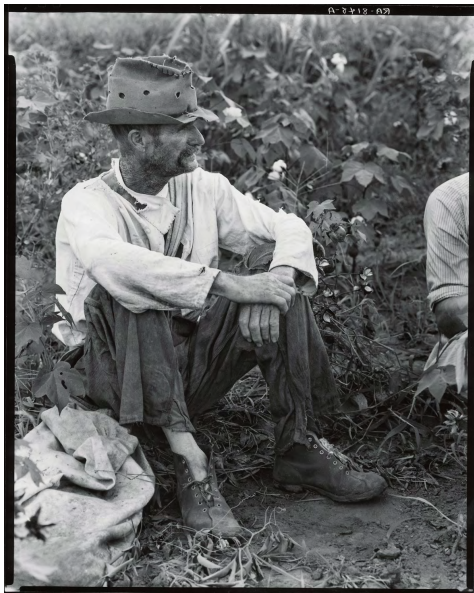
## WALKER EVANS

A master of photography, Walker Evans started with the Resettlement Administration in 1935 and spent about 18 months photographing subjects in nine states, including West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Arkansas. His work is distinctive for its technical precision and composition. Some of Evans's interiors, including that of Floyd Burroughs's cabin, right, achieve the artistic complexity of Dutch Renaissance paintings.

Evans believed in letting pictures speak for themselves—and usually in a soft voice. More than any other FSA collection, Evans's work expresses a sense of



*Washstand in the dog run and kitchen of Floyd Burroughs's cabin. Hale County, Alabama, 1936.*



*Bud Fields in his cotton patch. Hale County, Alabama, 1936.*

quiet reflection. He advocated creating a "pure record not propaganda," a philosophy sometimes at odds with that of Stryker, who saw the merits of using emotionally charged images to effect social change.

The pictures on this page are part of a series Evans did on Alabama sharecroppers with writer James Agee on special assignment for *Fortune*. The magazine never used the story and photos, but they appeared as a book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in 1941.



*Young musicians at Skyline Farms, Alabama, 1937.*

## BEN SHAHN

Ben Shahn was an early contributor to the Historical Section—the FSA division managed by Roy Stryker that housed the photographic unit. He became a key adviser on how FSA photographers approached their assignments.

An accomplished artist, Shahn used pictures to assist him in his painting. He took up photography only after his brother lost a bet and paid him with a Leica camera. After a few tips on the basics from his former roommate Walker Evans, Shahn got to work.

He was far less interested in fancy technique—which surely must have frustrated the meticulous Evans—than in the people and places in his lens. Though sometimes sloppy in composition, with cutoff faces or cluttered backgrounds, Shahn's pictures glow with personality. He depicted people enjoying the many facets of life—chatting after church, singing at a family gathering or pausing a street game to pose for a visiting photographer.



*Sunday in Scotts Run, West Virginia, 1935.*



*Coal miner's child, Omar, West Virginia, 1935.*



*Game of cooncan in store near Reserve, Louisiana, 1937.*

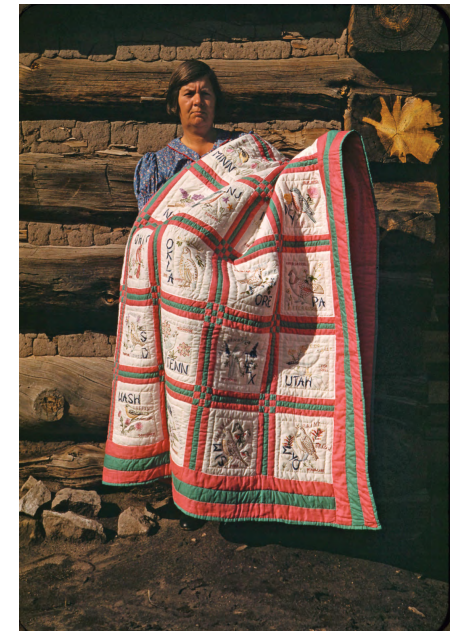
## RUSSELL LEE

The most prolific and far-roaming of FSA photographers, Russell Lee produced more than 19,000 prints for the FSA (out of the collection's total of 63,000) and visited 29 states between 1936 and 1942. Independently wealthy, Lee nevertheless found it convenient to live out of his car

during his many travels across country. He is known today for his insightful images of America on the verge of political and social upheaval—a man drinking from a “colored” fountain in Oklahoma City, down-on-their-luck patrons of a Minnesota bar in the late '30s, a barefoot girl standing next to



*Cutting the pies and cakes at the barbecue dinner, Pie Town, New Mexico, fair, 1940.*



*Mrs. Bill Stagg with state quilt, which she made, Pie Town, New Mexico, 1940.*

a broken dresser in a Missouri shack home.

But Lee also had a knack for capturing the moods of any given moment, whether it's the quiet concentration of a card game, the excitement of a town fair or dignified pride in a craft well made.



*Mr. and Mrs. Andy Bahain, FSA borrowers, on their farm near Kersey, Colorado, 1939.*



*Chickens take shelter from sand. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936.*

### ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN

Arthur Rothstein was the first photographer Stryker hired for the Historical Section photographic unit in 1935. Over his five years with the unit, Rothstein helped to perfect the documentary style that later typified the photography in *Life*, *Look* and other premier magazines.

A lifelong New Yorker who hadn't ventured out of the city before he started working for Stryker, Rothstein made a point of living among the people he was assigned to photograph, and tried to be as

unobtrusive as possible to put his subjects at ease. His best-known series is of a man and his sons trying to batten down their farm during a dust storm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. The farm's chickens seeking shelter, above, is from that Dust Bowl series. Rothstein had uncommon empathy and affection for his subjects. His images of Colorado farmer Andy Bahain and his wife, left, showing off the bounty reaped from their FSA farm loan exemplify his brand of documentary storytelling.



*Coming home from school. Mining town, Osage, West Virginia, 1938.*



*Mountain children on stone steps of their bome. Up Stinking Creek, Pine Mountain, Kentucky, 1940.*

*Jitterbugging in juke joint, Saturday evening, outside Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1939.*



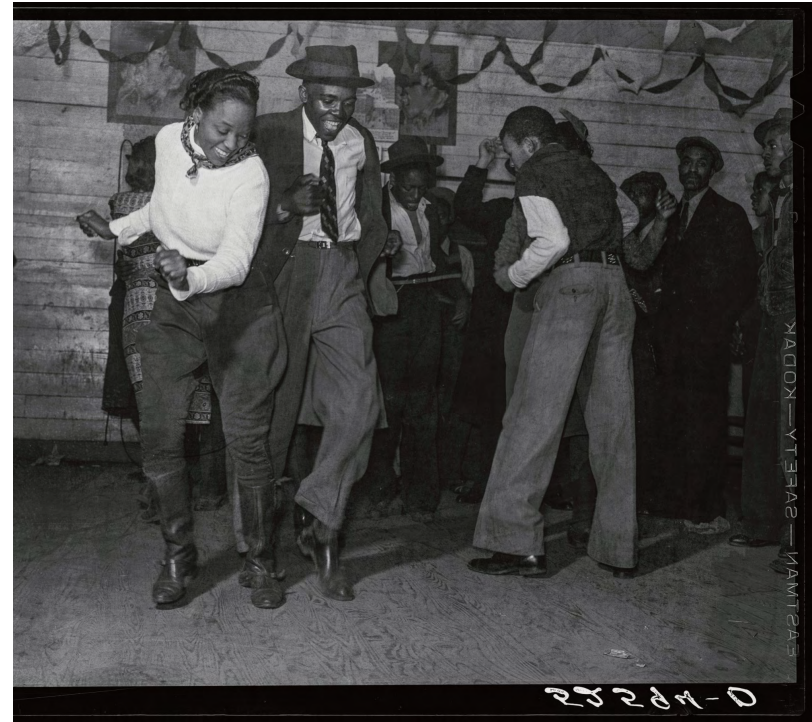
## MARION POST WOLCOTT

One of the busiest staffers at the FSA, Marion Post Wolcott came to the agency as a working professional photographer. She was the first full-time female photographer at the FSA. Wolcott had studied child psychology in Vienna, Austria, where she became alarmed at the rise of fascism in the 1930s, and later taught at progressive schools before devoting herself to taking pictures full time.

Wolcott's mother had been a progressive activist, touring many poor areas of the country in the 1920s. When Wolcott was preparing to go on her first FSA assignment, to West Virginia, her mother suggested she look for clothes hanging on the line to better understand her subjects.

Wolcott's friendly manner and many social contacts afforded her access to settings such as dance clubs in African American

neighborhoods that would have been closed to other photographers. Her images of gleeful jitterbug dancers and juke-joint patrons are some of the most evocative of the FSA era. Perhaps because of her experience working with children, Wolcott had a unique talent for photographing them in candid moments, as in her picture of three siblings on the steps of their Kentucky home.





*Chopping cotton on rented land near White Plains, Greene County, Georgia, 1941.*

## JACK DELANO

Unlike that of many of his FSA peers, Jack Delano's background didn't lead him directly to photography, although he was undoubtedly artistic. Born Jacob Ovcharov in Ukraine before immigrating to the United States, he was a musician, composer and occasional illustrator who earned a place at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. While

there, he adopted his American-sounding name, borrowing the Jack from boxer Jack Dempsey and the Delano from a female acquaintance.

Delano took up photography as a means of fulfilling a personal mission to make the world better. His FSA images are alive with artistic flair and scope. A series showing workers chopping cotton

in Greene County, Georgia, has the scale and saturated color of Van Gogh, who was one of his influences. "I thought I could portray ordinary working people," he once wrote, "with the same compassion and understanding that Van Gogh had shown for the peasants of Holland with pencil and paintbrush."



## GORDON PARKS

Gordon Parks took up photography in 1937 after he saw some early published examples of work by the FSA's photographic unit. He worked as a fashion photographer in Minneapolis and Chicago before earning a one-year fellowship under Stryker in Washington. One of Parks's mentors was Jack Delano.

As the only Black photographer at the FSA, Parks developed an unexpected insight into the nation's capital where, as he put it, he "found out what prejudice was really like." Parks saw through racial inequities to focus on the people who kept the city humming but were all but invisible to the powerful. His images of Ella Watson, a charwoman in the FSA's building, are among the most moving from the agency's last months before it was rolled into the Office of War Information.

Parks worked for the war office, where he specialized in capturing working-class people in urban jobs, such as the Fulton Fish Market stevedores in New York, below. ●



*Fulton Fish Market stevedores unloading and weighing fish in the early morning, New York, 1943.*