

DOROTHEA LANGE [1895-1965]

## Migrant Mother, 1936

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The Great Depression was especially hard on farmers. They not only suffered through the national economic crisis but endured a string of natural disasters, including floods and dust storms that devastated their crops and destroyed their livelihoods. Thousands of poverty-stricken families migrated to the agricultural fields of California in search of work, only to find that life was not much better there. The Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration), one of the agencies established by Franklin D. Roosevelt's progressive social policies, employed a team of photographers to document the lives of these migrant workers. The object was to demonstrate the need for federal assistance and justify legislation that would make it possible. Dorothea Lange was among the agency photographers whose task, as the program's director explained, was to "introduce America to Americans."

In March 1936, having just completed a month-long assignment for the Resettlement Administration, Lange was driving home through San Luis Obispo County when the crudely lettered sign of a migrant workers' campsite caught her eye. Instinct rather than reason compelled her to stop: "I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon." Laborers were leaving as she arrived, for late-winter rains had destroyed the pea crop, and with it every opportunity for work. But just inside the camp, sheltered in a makeshift tent, she found a careworn woman with several unkempt children. As Lange was later to learn, the family was immobilized: after days of eating nothing but frozen vegetables



**18-B Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), *Migrant Mother* (Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California), February 1936. Black-and-white photograph. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information, Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.**

taken from the fields, they had sold the tires from their car to buy food.

In the space of ten minutes Lange photographed the squalid scene, moving closer to her subject with each exposure. The last was the close-up view of the woman with three children that we now know as *Migrant Mother*. With that photograph, Lange achieved what she had set out to do for the Resettlement Association: "to register the things about those people that were more important than how poor they were," she explained, "— their pride, their strength, their spirit."

*Migrant Mother* does not take in a single detail of the pea pickers' camp—the bleak landscape and muddy ground, the tattered tents and dilapidated pickup trucks. Still, the photograph evokes the uncertainty and despair resulting from continual poverty. The mother's furrowed brow and deeply lined face make her look much older than she is (thirty-two). Her right hand touches the down-turned corner of her mouth in an unconscious gesture of anxiety. Her sleeve is tattered and her dress untidy; another of Lange's photographs shows the mother nursing the baby who now lies sleeping in her lap. Evidently she has done all she can for her family and has nothing left to offer. The older children press against her body in a mute appeal for comfort, but she seems as oblivious to them as she does to Lange's camera. Lange herself knew only the outline of the woman's circumstances; she never even learned her name, or that she was a full-blooded American Indian raised in Oklahoma, in the Indian Territory of the Cherokee Nation.

The morning after Lange visited the camp, she printed the photographs and took them to the *San Francisco News*. They were

published as illustrations to an article recounting the plight of the destitute pea pickers, and the story was repeated in newspapers throughout the nation. The photographs were shocking: it was unconscionable that the workers who put food on American tables could not feed themselves. Spurred to action by pictures that revealed not the economic causes, but the human consequences of poverty, the federal government promptly sent twenty thousand pounds of food to California migrant workers.

For all its power and effectiveness as a documentary photograph, *Migrant Mother* endures as a work of art. With the mother at the center of a classically triangular composition and two small heads on either side, the image bears the iconic emotional and symbolic character of a classical monument or a Renaissance Madonna. Yet Lange herself could never understand its particular appeal. When she once complained about the continual use of this photograph to the neglect of her others, she was reminded by a friend that “time is the greatest of editors, and the most reliable.”

Source: *Picturing America: Teachers Resource Book*. National Endowment for the Humanities.