

**TEACHING WITH ONLINE PRIMARY SOURCES:
DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

**UNSHUTTERED LENS:
DOROTHEA LANGE, DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY,
AND GOVERNMENT WORK, 1935-1945**

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In November 1940, on Arizona State Highway 87, south of Chandler, in Maricopa County, Dorothea Lange took a photograph of a mother and four small children. Caught in the powerful forces of the Great Depression, this migrant family's plight was used to drive government relief policy. Twenty months later, at the Manzanar Relocation Center in California, Lange photographed another family: a Japanese American family whose migration was intentional, forced by government order.

Understanding that government reports from the New Deal's "alphabet agencies" alone did not always grab the attention of Congress or the public, the Roosevelt administration hired photographers, including Dorothea Lange, to get its message across. Lange was initially employed by the Resettlement Administration (RA), which later became the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), and later was employed by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) and the Office of War Information (OWI). In these positions, her photography did more than satisfy the government's primary purpose of creating an informational record. Her work focused on the government's policies and their impact on people.

More than 1,300 of her government photographs, including the migrant family and Japanese American family, are digitized and readily available online through the National Archives' Archival Research Catalogue (ARC) at <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/>. The collection provides students with the means to explore the intersection between photography and public policy that occurred as images became a more powerful medium in the twentieth century. Was Dorothea Lange a cultural interpreter? Former Lange assistant, noted photographer, and protégé Rondal Partridge, said, "You ask questions of great photographs, and great photographs ask questions of you."¹ Lange's photographic work "begs the question."

Dorothea Lange was an unlikely candidate for success in the male-dominated field of photography. Born into a middle-class family in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895, she was expected to pursue a traditionally female profession, such as teaching. Unwilling to be limited by such gender expectations, she announced upon graduation

¹Bruce Bustard, *Picturing the Century: One Hundred Years of Photography from the National Archives* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 5.

from high school that she was going to be a photographer, and, without having picked up a camera, set out in pursuit of that goal.

The equipment in those days was very cumbersome, a possible difficulty for Lange who limped after contacting polio at age seven. Teaching herself the rudiments of photography, she began her career by convincing the owner of a highly successful Fifth Avenue portrait studio to take her on as an apprentice. There she developed an eye for crafting evocative images through staged portraits. She learned darkroom techniques by allowing an itinerant photographer to use her basement for his work. She took one course at Columbia with a respected photography professor, but did little of the assigned work.

Her independent spirit was evident in 1918 when she and her only close friend pooled their resources (\$140) and set off to "see the world." In San Francisco, when their money was stolen by a pickpocket, Dorothea took a job at a photography developing lab, joined a camera club, and developed a group of Bohemian, artistic friends. Set up in her own studio by a benefactor, Dorothea launched a successful portrait studio catering to San Francisco's upper class. She married an artist 21 years her senior, Maynard Dixon, entered what developed into a rocky marriage, and had two sons. Working hard at balancing family, artistic trips with her husband, and her portrait studio, her life suddenly shifted with the onset of the Great Depression. National events stirred her to focus her lens in a different direction.

Wanting to document the effects of turmoil outside caused by the crisis gripping the nation, Dorothea abandoned her indoor studio. She took her camera to the streets and focused on social crises in the city such as Depression breadlines. Her street images from 1932 to 1935, such as the unemployed worker seen in ARC# 195825, were exhibited in the Bay Area titled as "Documentary" and caught the attention of Paul Taylor, an economics professor and social activist at the University of California, Berkeley. Concerned about the changing rural economy, Taylor was working on a report for a state relief agency on farming communities hit hard by the Depression. He hired Lange to take photographs to illustrate this report. While preparing the report, Taylor and Lange were struck by the numbers of families who had been "blowed out" by the Dust Bowl storms and had flooded into California seeking employment in agribusiness.

Lange's work as a portrait photographer enhanced her ability to see striking images in the field and endowed her photographs with a special personal and emotional quality. Even her method of using large, fixed-tripod cameras, instead of the smaller, lighter 35mm cameras favored by other field photographers, distinguished her field work. These cameras, which were more stationary and personal than 35mm, created a polite space between Lange and her subjects, and allowed her to establish direct contact until the last moment when she bowed her head over the viewfinder and snapped the photo. The cameras allowed shots to be composed in a careful, unrushed manner. The three-image series of a migrant family found in ARC (#s 522506, 522527, 522529) demonstrated her technique. She only used natural lighting, again less

intrusive, more nuanced, and more authentic in documenting the scene. Some critics have attributed her method as critical to the effectiveness of her work.

One photographic series of desperate pea pickers whose crop had failed was rushed to the *San Francisco News* desk. Spurred by these images of displaced farm workers and families, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) allocated \$22,000 in funding to establish two emergency migrant worker camps in California. Lange visually documented the improvements in the lives of the migrants in those camps, with toilets, hot showers, stoves, platform tents, and a large community building made possible with federal funding. The government established over 25 similar relief camps over the next four years.

As Paul Taylor and Lange worked together for the relief cause—his writing paired with her images—they developed a deep relationship. Both divorced out of weak marriages and then they married, cementing a lifelong partnership. Their work came to the attention of Roy Stryker in the Resettlement Administration (RA) in Washington, DC, which later, under political pressure from Congress for more oversight, became the Farm Security Administration (FSA) under the Department of Agriculture. In August 1935, Dorothea Lange joined two male photographers on the staff of the RA. This group, under the FSA, eventually encompassed some twenty photographers and logged over 270,000 photographic plates.

In February 1936, the RA authorized Lange to make the first of many field work trips. Roy Stryker sent his photographers out with specific “scripts” in mind but gave them great freedom in choosing subjects to support the scripts. In 1937-38 Dorothea worked for the FSA throughout the West coast region, documenting the plight of farmers affected by the Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the effects of mechanization. Both her photographs and her captions provided insight into upheaval among rural laborers at a time when one tractor did the work of eight men and eight mules and farmers were turned off land that had supported them and their forbears for generations.

Lange’s photographs documenting advertisements offering work at 35 cents per hour for harvesting fragile plums, one dollar per ton picking peaches, twenty cents per hour for potatoes, and special rates for African Americans to pick cotton, highlighted the effects of agribusiness on migrant laborers and the issues of tenant farming and sharecropping throughout rural America. Her work in the migrant labor camps filled with “Okies” led to collaboration with John Steinbeck in 1938. They jointly published a pamphlet titled *Their Blood is Strong*. The impact of their work was evident the next year when John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Lange not only documented displaced farm laborers in the West but also traveled the nation in 1937-39 to photograph rural communities. She provided a record of rural life in Depression-era America. These images make up the bulk of the images contained in Record Group 83 in the National Archives. In the fall of 1939 budget cuts caused Roy Stryker to cut back his photographic outreach program. As a result, Lange was dropped from the Federal payroll in January 1940. Her government work had developed her reputation as a photographer, and as a result she was awarded a

Guggenheim Fellowship, the first ever for a woman photographer. Her plan was to document rural religious communities across the nation. World events, however, led her to postpone this work.

As the nation shifted its focus during World War II, so did Dorothea Lange. After the bombing of the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, anti-Japanese feeling in America ran high. Despite the fact that Nisei (American-born Japanese) eagerly joined the war effort, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, on February 19, 1942. This order led to the internment of all persons of Japanese ancestry (some 110,000) for the duration of the war. It was administered by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) of the Department of the Interior under the sensitive direction of Milton Eisenhower. He had formerly been with the Department of Agriculture and was aware of that agency's successful use of government photographers. The WRA hired Lange to document the entire process of relocation from home through assembly centers to the Manzanar internment camp, one of ten isolated camp locations.

Lange began work on March 22, 1942, when the roundup commenced. Japanese Americans were assigned numbers and given seven days to settle their affairs, including disposing of homes and businesses. At the end of those seven days they reported to be relocated. Her photograph of "the Mochida family awaiting evacuation bus" (ARC# 537505) poignantly illustrated the government-ordered relocation. The next step was busing to temporary assembly centers, one at a San Bruno racetrack where families were housed in horse stalls. Dorothea photographed each step of this process, ending with settling in the internment camps. There she photographed community meals, activities, and labor, including the making of camouflage nets for the war effort. By following several specific families through the process, she personalized the experience. She continued to use large cameras with tripods and even had a platform built for the top of her station wagon. Long hours on the road, often from 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., ended with Lange processing the film in her darkroom at home.

Although assigned to document the process thoroughly, Lange was limited in a variety of ways, especially when the Japanese Americans were actually in the camp at Manzanar. Her most moving photographs were taken when she had the most freedom, documenting the process prior to arriving at the camp. In the end, she was only allowed into Manzanar three times. The WRA employed her, but the military supervised the relocation that she was trying to document. Each authority was working under different agendas. The WRA was interested in managing information to promote positive public opinion, while the military was most concerned about limiting public exposure on the grounds of national defense. As a result, Lange was caught in a crossfire of overlapping jurisdictions. She was restricted from taking photographs of soldiers with guns, barbed wire, and watchtowers. The Western Defense Command had a working arrangement with the WRA for clearance of all photographs. Correspondence between the two parties and legal counsel for the WRA indicated that this working arrangement was ambiguous.

Controversy surrounded Lange who had shared one of her photographs with Caleb Foote, a Quaker activist who used it as the cover of a pamphlet exposing internment. This action led the Western Defense Command to revoke Lange's credentials, but since the House Select Committee investigating defense migration (the Tolan Committee, February 28-March 2, 1942) had already published the picture, making it part of the public domain, charges that she had unlawfully leaked military information could not be sustained. On July 30, 1942, her employment with the WRA ended. She resigned, but the term "terminated" was also used in file correspondence. Lange was required to certify that all negatives, prints, and undeveloped film had been turned over to the government. She was not even allowed to retain a set of her own prints.

In 1946, Lange's WRA photographs were accessioned into the National Archives. These photographs received no public notice during her lifetime. Although the images were not readily available without clearance during the war, there were no restrictions on their access once they were part of the holdings of the National Archives. Yet they did not come to wide public attention until 1972, during heightened awareness of civil rights, when a Lange protégé and his wife, Richard and Maisie Conrat, used 27 still pictures for an exhibit entitled "Executive Order 9066." A few years later during the Jimmy Carter administration, there was an investigation on internment. Congress later approved reparations for those interned, and President Ronald Reagan presided over a formal reconciliation ceremony for them in 1988. The relocation was brought to the public eye. And in 2006, the volume *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* featured the most extensive use of the Lange images held at the National Archives.²

With the end of her government work in 1944, Lange continued her work as a freelance photographer and a staff photographer for *Life* magazine. In 1945 Lange fell ill with intestinal issues, possibly influenced by the rigor and stress of her government service. Continuing the focus from her early government work, she pursued projects related to rural life and gender, expanding to a global scale. By 1963 her health began to deteriorate and public attention to her body of work increased. Her photographs inspired a documentary film at KQED public television and an oral history interview with the Smithsonian Institution. It was at this point that she was given access to the Department of Agriculture negatives by the National Archives and the Library of Congress so that she could choose and develop prints for what was to be her final project, a retrospective of her life's work. She completed the project before she died on October 11, 1965. Her retrospective opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1966.

Lange's work for both the FSA/BAE and the WRA/OWI created powerful images that helped drive public policy through a critical period in American history.

²*Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment*, Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro, eds. (New York: Norton, 2006).

Raising artistry in the field to new levels, her work had a lasting impact on the field of documentary photography. Her unshuttered lens helped millions of Americans to “see” history, both then and today.

The documents featured in this article can be accessed online through the National Archives Archival Research Catalog (ARC). Those documents relating to the RA, FSA, and BAE (Great Depression) come from the Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Record Group 83, series G (488 images are digitized and available online), and are held at either the National Archives in College Park, MD, or the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, NY. Those documents relating to Japanese relocation comes from the Records of The War Relocation Authority, Record Group 210, series G (864 images are digitized and available online), and are held at the National Archives in College Park, MD.

Teaching Suggestions:

Dorothea Lange’s photographs in the holdings of the National Archives can be accessed online through the Archival Research Catalog (ARC). You can access the entire collection or view them individually. To access the entire collection, go to http://www.archives.gov/research_room/arc/. Select the yellow “Search” button on the left side of the page. In the keyword box, type in “Dorothea Lange.” Check the “Limit results to” using 2000 (because there are 1,361 images in the collection). Check the filter “Descriptions of Archival Materials linked to digital copies.” GO. On the next page, in the “Sorted by” line, check “record group/collection” and select “Re-sort.” This will present her photographs, six per page, by the two record groups, 83 and 210. The first set will come from Record Group 83, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. The second set will come from RG 210, Records of the War Relocation Authority. (Hint: To scroll through the entire collection without the live links to information, click the “Printer-friendly version” button, in a few moments thumbnails of the entire collection will be available to scroll through. If individual images are to be selected, return to the search screen and conduct a keyword search using the chosen image’s ARC identifier number.)

1. Focus activity with photo analysis: Learning to “see” from a photographer’s perspective:

Provide students with a copy of “Depression: Unemployed; destitute man leaning against vacant store: photo by Dorothea Lange, ca. 1935” (ARC# 195825), available online in the Archival Research Catalogue (ARC) on the National Archives website at http://www.archives.gov/research_room/arc/ and give them a copy of the photograph analysis worksheet found at www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/analysis_worksheets/worksheets.html.

Ask student pairs to create a physical “lens” by folding a sheet of paper into quarters and cutting/tearing a one-inch quarter circle in the center. Tell them to unfold

the paper and carefully explore all parts of the photograph. Encourage them to share their discoveries. Next ask student pairs to complete a copy of the photograph analysis worksheet. Then guide a discussion about the Great Depression based on questions from the worksheet.

2. Comparison activity: Family from two views:

Divide the class in half. Provide one half of the class with a copy of ARC# 522527 (Migrant family along Arizona Highway) from the BAE/FSA collection and the other half with ARC# 537989 (Japanese American family at Manzanar) from the WRA collections. Using the "lens" technique from teaching activity #1, ask students to explore the images individually. Ask them to hypothesize when each was taken and for what purpose. Next, present students with information about each government agency and its purpose. Guide a discussion that compares and contrasts the two images. Ask students to consider the public relations implications of having these images available to the American public.

Extension activity: Comparing the collections of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics taken during the Depression and of the War Relocation Administration taken during Japanese relocation:

Ask student pairs to create a chart with eight columns. Instruct them to label the columns: Transportation, Possessions, Housing, Work, Activities, Meal Preparation, Size of Families, and Children. Next, direct them to go online into ARC and tell them to access the entire BAE/FSA and WRA collections. (Instructions are found at the beginning of the Teaching Suggestions. The BAE/FSA group begins with "hit" #1; the WRA set begins with #489.) Ask student pairs to scroll through both collections looking for one example from each collection to reflect the elements identified on their charts. Tell them to list the ARC #s of their examples on their charts and describe the content of the selected images. Direct students to examine their completed chart and circle similarities and underline the differences they see in the examples. Based on the charts, ask students what differentiates the two families' experiences. Close with a discussion of the emotional impact of each collection and the impact of documentary photography on their understanding of the two events.

3. Connecting words and images: Writing captions to articulate point of view:

Using ten examples of Dorothea Lange's photographs (see below) on migrant workers displaced during the Depression, ask students to create captions for each image. Two ways to present the images are: 1) Using PowerPoint, place the images in a slide show format, run through them once with five-second intervals. Then repeat the slide show, at twenty-second intervals, asking students to suggest their own captions. 2) A second method would be to distribute a thumbnail contact sheet of the slideshow and ask students to write captions at home. On completion of the captions, go through the set of images, using the slideshow method, and invite three or more students to

share their captions (or until the variety of perspectives wanes) for each image. Guide a discussion of what each caption reveals about how captions combined with images stimulate deeper analysis. Ask why they choose their particular wording. Conclude with students creating a list of five ways words and images can reflect point of view.

Suggested image ARC #s: 195825, 521808, 521735, 521748, 196510, 521699, 522527, 521786, 522540, 522541, 521652, 521650, 522492, 521717, 521764, 522176, 522262, 522028, 522024, 522239, 522504, 522214, 522251, 522508, 521805, 521788, 521804, 521787, 521812, 521809, 521578, 521680, 522054, 522058

Extension activity: Working from a “script”:

Ask students to work in small groups to categorize the three most common types of captions used by students. Combine their choices to create a class list to use as a guide for finding provocative subjects worthy of a photographic essay, just as Roy Stryker sent the FSA photographers out with a “script.” Send students out with digital cameras to create their own ten-image documentary. Invite them to present their documentary as a poster, PowerPoint, video, or exhibit. Use the style guide as a basis for critique to explore how students found their own “voice” through their scripted photographic essays.

Extension activity: Read between the lines:

Compare the captions that Lange wrote for the two photographs in teaching activity #2. Encourage students to examine her word choice to uncover how point of view is revealed. Ask them to consider where Lange limited herself to being informational and where she injected commentary through her word choice. Identify specific words or phrases that indicate her point of view.

4. Cross-curricular activity: Illustrating history and literature:

Team up with a language arts/literature colleague and prepare a unit related to the Japanese internment experience. Assign students to read either *Farewell to Manzanar* or *Snow Falling on Cedars*.³ Ask students to take on the role of the illustrations manager at a publicity firm. Tell them to choose five to ten photographs that Lange took for the WRA to help illustrate the work they read. Chapters 7, 9, and 10 are the most relevant to this activity in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, while Chapters 1-5 are useful in *Farewell to Manzanar*. Next, ask students to develop a plan for using the images in a publicity campaign to advertise the literary work. Post the work and ask students to reflect on how literature is served by photographic illustration. (To access the WRA collection in an ARC search, type in the key word “Manzanar.” Click the filter that re-sorts the images by date to get a chronological order to the images. Then

³Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar: A True Story of Japanese American Experience During and After the World War II Internment* (New York: Random House, 1973); David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars* (New York: Random House, 1995).

utilize the “print friendly version” button to create a thumbnail list to scroll through the entire collection. Additional information on FDR’s Executive Order 9066 can be found at <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=74.>)

Extension activity:

As a related activity using the same photographer but a different topic, ask students to choose specific Lange images to illustrate John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, the novel inspired by their joint project on migrant workers. Dorothea Lange’s photographs of migrant farm workers displaced by the Dust Bowl are found in Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Record Group 83, at the National Archives.

5. Online Resources Review: Understanding history through place:

Ask students to explore two different online sites that feature information and images of Manzanar. Through the Archival Research Catalog (ARC) on the National Archives website, <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc>, begin a search of Dorothea Lange’s images in ARC under the key word “Manzanar.” Next, go to the National Park Service’s Manzanar general website to explore their information on Manzanar at <http://www.nps.gov/manz/forteachers/teaching-with-historic-places.htm> or go to the specific link at <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhpwwlps/lessons/89manzanar/89manzanar.htm>. Instruct students to compare the two presentations of the subject and consider how and why the two approaches to information differ. Assign students to write a review for each approach for a hypothetical website review blog. Tell them to include in the review a consideration of the purpose of the organization in posting this information; ease of use; and effectiveness of the information; and, if there is a point of view evident with each approach, explain what it is and why that perspective might exist.

6. Cross-curricular activity: A study in method and view through photography:

Team up with a visual arts or photography teacher. Using images from two photographers on the same subject, ask students to evaluate the two photographers’ “lens.” Access the work of both Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams related to Manzanar. Lange and Adams photographed Manzanar but at different times (Lange in the early stages, Adams not until 1943) and saw the camp through a very different lens. Introduce students to the relocation process by going to “Teaching with Documents” lessons on Japanese relocation: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation/>.

The social studies students research the government’s use of photographers during the Roosevelt administration. (Another study of government photography can be found in *Picturing the Century: One Hundred Years of Photography from the National Archives* [see footnote 1], at http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/picturing_the_century/.) Share their findings with photography students.

Photography students should research and develop an expertise to share about cameras and methods by researching the capabilities of the cameras Lange used: a Rolliflex 4x5 and a Graflex. For her work in the 1940s, she added a Zeiss Juwell, after working with Ansel Adams. Share how camera type affects the result. Explore what other aspects of photography (e.g. developing and cropping) can affect an image.

Choose a series of images (teacher- or student-generated) from each collection. Divide students into groups and give them the two sets. Assign students to create a chart with six columns labeled: theme, subject matter, point-of-view, method, composition, and tone. Direct them to fill in the chart either in groups or as a class based on their assessment of the selected images. Encourage student groups to take the role of curator and create an exhibition of the images complete with explanatory captions. After the exhibit is completed, guide a "critique session" of each exhibit wherein students compare and contrast the manner in which each photographer used the lens. Create a list of these identifying aspects based on the comparisons, one for each photographer. Conclude with a discussion on what could be the reasons for those differences.

Lange's WRA work is in Record Group 210 and can be accessed with the keyword "Manzanar." Adams' work can be found at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/anseladams/aamabout.html> or in *Manzanar* (New York: Times Books, 1988), photographs by Ansel Adams and commentary by John Hersey.

Extension activity: Visit an exhibition of photographs at a local gallery and review the exhibition based on the skills demonstrated in the above curator activity.

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