



- 55 fiction
- advertising info
- archives
- avila bay watch
- best of slo
- classifieds
- connections
- hot dates
- menus
- movies
- the shredder
- about new times

home

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One of the most famous photos in American history—Dorothea Lange’s ‘Migrant Mother’—was taken right here in Nipomo. It captured the heart of the public and moved a nation, but it didn’t tell the whole story.

‘To photograph people is to violate them.’

–Susan Sontag

‘On Photography’

by Geoffrey Dunn

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A dark, drizzly afternoon in March of 1936. Dorothea Lange has just finished a month-long assignment chronicling the plight of migratory farm laborers near Los Angeles and is driving north along Highway 101 to her comfortable residence in the Berkeley foothills. "Sixty-five miles an hour for seven hours would get me home to my family that night," Lange would later recall. "My eyes were glued to the wet and gleaming highway that stretched out ahead. I felt freed"

Just after passing through Santa Maria, on the outskirts of Nipomo, Lange passes a crude wooden sign on the side of the road, proclaiming "Pea-Pickers Camp." The 40-year-old Lange already has collected a month’s worth of field notes and photographs, and the staff photographer for Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration resists the temptation to pull over and take more pictures.

Twenty minutes later, just before she reaches San Luis Obispo, Lange changes her mind and makes a U-turn on the barren highway. At Nipomo, "like a homing pigeon," she turns onto a muddy road and discovers a sprawling, squalid campsite of nearly 2,500 migrant farm workers battling starvation and the elements. They had been lured to the camp by newspaper advertisements promising work in the pea fields, only to be left stranded when protracted, late-winter rains destroyed the crop.

Almost spontaneously, Lange zeros in on a woman and a handful of children huddled in a tattered, lean-to tent. "I was following instinct, not reason," Lange recalled. "I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet."

Lange pulls out her Graflex camera and snaps a quick, wide-angle portrait of the rag-tag family. Over the course of the next 10 minutes, she will take five more photos, each time moving closer to the lean-to. The final photograph is a vertical portrait of the mother, her despair-ridden eyes staring anxiously off-camera, an uncertain hand raised to a drawn mouth.

Lange packs up her equipment and jots down a few field notes. She addresses the woman cursorily and learns only that she is 32 years old. Lange never bothers to ask her name nor where she’s from nor how she arrived at this desolate campsite in Nipomo. What she wanted is now safely ensconced on

The woman and her children return to their lives of survival. Lange spins along the muddy road onto Highway 101 and makes her way back to Berkeley. Little does either of them realize that the profound anguish expressed that afternoon by the woman with no name will be frozen in history for eternity.

An entire era etched in silver

No other image in the American archive resonates with the emotional urgency and tragic poignancy of the photograph that would come to be known as *Migrant Mother*, the sixth exposure taken by Lange during that fateful encounter in Nipomo. Indeed, Lange's somber portrait has achieved near mythical status, symbolizing, if not defining, an entire era in our nation's history.

Roy Emerson Stryker, who headed up the New Deal's photography project—which also included the likes of Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein and Russell Lee—referred to *Migrant Mother* as the "ultimate" photo of the Depression Era. "[Lange] never surpassed it. To me, it was *the* picture ...," he wrote. "The others were marvelous, but that was special She is immortal."

For all its acclaim, however, *Migrant Mother* has long remained shrouded in mystery and behind-the-scenes controversy. Perhaps because she felt rushed that mizzly afternoon in Nipomo, Lange was uncharacteristically remiss in ascertaining information about her subject. The little she did record was largely misleading and factually incorrect, including the date of the photos, which her notes alternately report as both February and March of 1936.

Through her negligence, in effect, Lange perpetrated a case of historic deception on the American public.

The person most angry and, indeed, most bitter about Lange's portrayal was the "migrant mother" herself, Florence Owens Thompson. The Lange photo stamped a permanent *Grapes of Wrath* stereotype on Thompson's life—a life that was far more complex and complicated than Lange, or the American public for that matter, might have ever imagined.

It was in the late 1970s that Thompson's identity was first made public, when the Associated Press sent a story over the wires entitled, "Woman Fighting Mad Over Famous Depression Photo." Thompson had written a letter to the editor of her local newspaper expressing her disdain for the image.

In the AP story, Thompson declared that she felt "exploited" by Lange's portrait. "I wish she hadn't taken my picture," she declared. "I can't get a penny out of it. [Lange] didn't ask my name. She said she wouldn't sell the pictures. She said she'd send me a copy. She never did." The photo had become yet another cross for Thompson to bear in a lifetime of hardships.

Five years later, Thompson made headlines again after she suffered a stroke and died soon thereafter at the home of her son in Scotts Valley, a few miles outside of Santa Cruz. Her obituary appeared, along with Lange's historic portrait, in dozens of newspapers across the country. Ironically, many of the errors recorded by Lange in 1936 resurfaced once again in the chronicles of Thompson's death.

Increasingly frustrated, however, by the way in which their mother's legacy has been treated during the past several years, Thompson's children, including her son Troy Owens and two of her daughters, Katherine McIntosh and Norma Rydlewski—both of whom appear with their mother in the classic Lange photograph—decided to set the record straight for the first time.

Keeping the whole family together

While the real migrant mother was, indeed, a native of Oklahoma, she also was a full-blooded Native American, whose family had been displaced from tribal lands. Moreover, she and her first husband, Cleo Leroy Owens, had been living in California for most of the past decade when Lange captured Thompson's image on film.

She was born Florence Leona Christie on Sept. 1, 1903, in the Indian Territory of the Cherokee Nation, to which both of her parents claimed blood rights. Her father, Jackson Christie, had served time in prison and abandoned her mother, Mary Jane Cobb, before Florence was born. Her mother remarried Charles Akman, of Choctaw descent, in the spring of 1905, and together they raised Florence on a small family farm in Indian Territory outside Tahlequah, Okla. Florence was raised believing that Akman was her true father.

On Valentine's Day in 1921, 17-year-old Florence married Cleo Owens, a 23-year-old farmer's son from Stone County, Miss. Shortly thereafter, their first daughter, Violet, was born, followed by a second daughter, Viola, and a son, Leroy.

In 1926, the burgeoning family—Florence was pregnant yet again—migrated west with other members of the Owens clan to Oroville, Calif., where the family found work in the saw mills of the Sierra foothills and in the farmlands of the Sacramento Valley.

By the spring of 1931, Florence had given birth to two more children in California—Troy and Ruby—and was pregnant with her sixth child, when husband Cleo died of tuberculosis. Daughter Katherine was born six months later.

Widowed with a half-dozen children, Florence worked in the fields during the day and at a restaurant at night to support her family. Eventually, she took up a relationship with a well-to-do Oroville business owner, and became pregnant by him in 1933. Terrified that she might lose her infant son to the father's influential family, Florence bolted with her children back to the Akman farm in Oklahoma, where she left the infant, Charlie, to be raised by his grandparents.

"Her biggest fear," recalled son Troy Owens, "was that if she were to ask for help [from the government], then they would have reason to take her children away from her. That was her biggest fear all through her entire life."

The following year, Florence, her parents, her seven children and various other Akman relatives migrated from Oklahoma to Shafter, just north of Bakersfield in the southern San Joaquin Valley. A short time later, she hooked up with yet another man, James R. Hill, a handsome bartender and butcher from Los Angeles. Soon she was pregnant again, eventually giving birth to Norma Lee in March of 1935.

By all accounts, Jim Hill was a nice guy from a respectable family who never could seem to get his act together. "I loved my dad dearly," Norma Rydlewski said, "but he had little ambition. He was never was able to hold down a job." The burden of supporting the family, and of keeping it together, fell on Florence.

Her years with Hill were ones of constant movement, migration and despair. They followed the crops throughout California and occasionally into Arizona. Florence had three more children by Hill, one of whom, Leana, died before her second birthday. They lived life on the edge—and never got off of it—not until well after World War II, when Florence married hospital administrator George Thompson.

'Mama's been shot, Mama's been shot'

the timing chain on the Hudson broke and they were forced to pull into the pea-picker's camp to fix their car. They were shocked to find so many people there—as many as 3,500 when they first arrived.

While removing the timing chain, Leroy and Troy put a hole through the radiator, which they hauled into the town of Nipomo on the afternoon that Dorothea Lange arrived at the camp.

"I remember that day very clearly," said Troy Owens. "We had the radiator on an old hand wagon that you guided with ropes. I remember a hill of some kind just before we reached town, because Leroy decided he was going to get on the wagon and ride down it. He ran into a concrete abutment along the road, and he and the radiator went flying and he got all skinned up.

"We got the radiator fixed and hurried back to camp to fix the car. When we got there, Mama told us there had been this lady who had been taking pictures, but that's all she told us, you know. It wasn't a big deal to her at the time."

The two boys and Hill put the Hudson back together, and the family made its way north to Watsonville.

In the field notes that she filed with her Nipomo photographs, Lange included the following description: "Seven hungry children. Father is native Californian. Destitute in pea pickers' camp ... because of failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tires to buy food."

Owens scoffed at the description. "There's no way we sold our tires, because we didn't have any to sell," he told this writer. "The only ones we had were on the Hudson and we drove off in them. I don't believe Dorothea Lange was lying, I just think she had one story mixed up with another. Or she was borrowing to fill in what she didn't have."

"Mother always said that Lange never asked her name or any questions, so what she [Lange] wrote she must have got from the older kids or other people in the camp," speculates daughter Katherine McIntosh, who appears in the *Migrant Mother* photo with her head turned away behind her mother's right shoulder. "She also told mother the negatives would never be published—that she was only going to use the photos to help out the people in the camp."

Lange, indeed, sent the photos to the Resettlement Administration in Washington, where the photos had an immediate impact on federal bureaucrats, who quickly rushed 20,000 pounds of food supplies to pea-picker camp in Nipomo.

Lange, however, also gave the photos to the editor of the *San Francisco News*, in which two of the wider-angle exposures appeared on March 10, 1936, under the heading: "Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squalor."

The following day, the classic *Migrant Mother* portrait appeared in the *News* above an editorial entitled, "What Does the 'New Deal' Mean to This Mother and Her Child?"

By then, the Owens-Hill family was camped on the outskirts of Watsonville, in the heart of the Pajaro Valley, where Troy and his brother Leroy tried to make extra money for the family hawking out-of-town newspapers in the farm community. They were walking through a downtown residential neighborhood when Troy spotted an open newspaper that was lying on a lawn.

"I screamed out, 'Mama's been shot, Mama's been shot,' " Owens recalled. "There was her picture, and it had an ink spot right in the middle of her forehead, and it looked like someone had put a bullet through her. We both

Museum of Modern Art, exhibit curator Sandra Phillips argued that Florence Thompson's "life [was] most likely saved by Lange's photo."

Phillips' assertion brought out groans of agony from Thompson's children. "We were already long gone from Nipomo by the time any food was sent there," said Owens. "That photo may well have saved some peoples' lives, but I can tell you for certain, it didn't save ours."

"Our life was hard long after that photograph was taken," added McIntosh emphatically. "That photo never gave mother or us kids any relief."

The 'most remarkable human documents'

The photographs taken by Lange and her colleagues at the Resettlement Administration (later to become better known as the Farm Security Administration) have been widely heralded as the epitome of documentary photography. The eminent photographer and curator Edward Steichen called them "the most remarkable human documents ever rendered in pictures."

In recent years, however, the FSA photographs have come under a growing criticism. Many view them as manipulative and condescending, to the point of assuming a "colonialistic" attitude toward their subjects.

In a compelling essay entitled "The Historian and the Icon," University of California at Berkeley professor Lawrence Levine has argued that the FSA photographers focused their lenses on "perfect victims," and in so doing, rendered a caricatured portrait of the era.

"Americans suffered, materially and physically, during the years of the Great Depression to an extent which we still do not fully fathom," Levine asserted. "But they also continued, as people always must, the business of living. They ate and they laughed, they loved and they fought, they worried and they hoped ... they filled their days, as we fill ours, with the essentials of everyday living."

With the notable exception of FSA photographer Russell Lee, whose largely overlooked body of work actually captures the dimensions of "everyday living," Lange and her colleagues focused almost exclusively on human suffering. That is most certainly the reason that people like Florence Owens Thompson—and many others who appeared in FSA images—resented their photographic portrayal.

"Mother was a woman who loved to enjoy life, who loved her children," said Rydlewski. "She loved music and she loved to dance. When I look at that photo of mother, it saddens me. That's not how I like to remember her."

Rydlewski noted that while the Depression was hard on her family, it was not all suffering. "Mama and daddy would take us to the movies a lot. We'd go to the carnival whenever it was in town, little things like that. We listened to the radio. If they had any money at all, they'd get us ice cream. In Shafter, we had friends and relatives visiting. We also had our fun."

Troy Owens echoed his sister's sentiments: "They were tough, tough times, but they were the best times we ever had."

Giving 'strength, pride and dignity'

Florence Owens Thompson's tempestuous relationship with the famous photograph of her took a final, ironic twist in the final months of her life. Most likely she was never aware of it.

In the spring of 1983, the 79-year-old Thompson, then living by herself in a Modesto trailer purchased for her by her children, was stricken with cancer.

Cancer.

Instead, she got weaker. Son Troy decided to take her into his Scotts Valley home, hoping that she would get stronger under the loving care of her family.

Thompson's health, however, continued to deteriorate. By mid-summer she needed round-the-clock nursing care that cost more than \$1,400 a week. The family couldn't afford it. Owens decided to issue a plea to the public in the hope of raising enough funds to nurse his mother back to health.

Owens turned to Jack Foley of the *San Jose Mercury News*, who understood immediately the historic implications of Florence Thompson's plight.

The story Foley filed for the *Mercury* generated national attention. More than \$35,000 poured into a special Migrant Mother Fund administered by Hospice Caring Project of Santa Cruz County, much of it coming in the form of crumpled dollar bills.

The contributions came in from all over the country. Nacadoches, Texas. Russellville, Ark. New York City. Los Angeles. But a good many of them came from the farm towns of the San Joaquin Valley that Florence Thompson called home for most her life—Fresno, Wasco, Tulare, Selma, Visalia.

"The famous picture of your mother for years gave me great strength, pride and dignity—only because she exuded those qualities so," wrote a woman from Santa Clara.

"Enclosed is a check for \$10 to assist the woman whose face gave and still gives eloquent expression to the need our country still has not met," expressed an anonymous note from New York.

One elderly woman from the Central Valley sent a contribution that most certainly would have struck a chord with Thompson: "I promised the Lord if I won any money in Reno that I would send you some. I wish I could send some more, but this is all I was given."

In all, nearly 2,000 letters arrived, and the overwhelming response forced the Owens-Hill children to reconsider Lange's portrait of their mother in a new light.

"None of us ever really understood how deeply Mama's photo affected people," said Owens. "I guess we had only looked at it from our perspective. For Mama and us, the photo had always been a bit of curse. After all those letters came in, I think it gave us a sense of pride."

For a short time, his mother's health seemed to improve a bit, but she never fully recovered. She could open her eyes, but could not speak. On Sept. 16, 1983, a few weeks past her 80th birthday, Florence Thompson died at her son's home.

"Right before Florence died," recalled her nurse, Sarah Wood Smith, "she opened her eyes and looked right at me. It was the most conscious she had been in a long time. I went to get the family. They were holding her, kissing her cheek, stroking her hair. Telling her how much they loved her. And then she took her last breath. It was a beautiful, very peaceful moment. It felt very complete."

She was buried at a cemetery in Empire, Calif., a few miles outside of Modesto. Her gravestone reads: "Migrant Mother—A Legend of the Strength of American Motherhood." Æ

Geoffrey Dunn is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, film professor, community access TV executive, historian and baseball buff who spends part of each year in Cambria.

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to top 