

# *Excellent Media Coverage*

Visual Arts Top Stories

## **Review: Dorothea Lange at Portland State University's Littman Gallery**

**By D.K. Row, The Oregonian      October 24, 2009, 7:00AM**

A young woman and her kids in a rural shacktown near Klamath Falls. Lange took this photo in 1939. With unemployment soaring, it may be heart-wrenching to see Dorothea Lange's photographs of Oregon taken near the end of the Great Depression in 1939. Her photographs of struggling migrant workers, farmers and their families in rural Oregon may revive collective fears of indigence during this, the Great Recession.

Still, the work by one of documentary photography's heroines, currently at Portland State University's Littman Gallery, are soothing in other ways. These are beautifully persuasive political images. They also remind us that America's most important -- and only limitless -- resource is dignity.

You may not have known about Lange's Oregon photographs. But surely everyone has seen a reproduction of Lange's "Migrant Mother" from 1936, one of photography's most legendary images and a kind of preamble to her Oregon work.



This photograph of a 32-year-old migrant worker, Florence Thompson, would achieve iconic stature, with her sorrow-etched, angular face epitomizing Dust Bowl poverty.

By the time she came to Oregon, Lange had been laid off and rehired twice by the Farm Security Administration, the New Deal program that tried to help families and farmers. Lange was one of several great shooters of the early 20th century hired by the FSA to provide a photographic history of the Depression and the people who survived it. Among them: Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Gordon Parks, Ben Shahn.

And, of course, Lange, the determined bohemian born into middle-class comfort in Hoboken, N.J. As a child, Lange contracted polio, which left one of her legs twisted. That might be one reason she identified strongly with society's outsiders, the impoverished, the forgotten.

You feel that sympathy in Lange's photographs of Oregon and the people in them, many of whom came to this state from different parts of the country to start a new life. Lange apparently produced a few hundred images from her travels through the Willamette Valley, along the Columbia River and in Josephine, Klamath and Malheur counties. If the 40 or so photos at the Littman are an accurate indication of this project, Lange was not after drama -- the harried, sad flight of the dispossessed, for example.

Rather, Lange's camera observes pointedly the course of humble lives trying to re-emerge: hop farmers and lumber workers laboring, or conversely, idling; young children hanging out or similarly working next to their parents in fields; and the desolate, dirt-strewn canvas cities where these lives were being reshaped.

On the surface, Lange recorded the daily rhythms of her subjects. Even in these shanties and other structures bereft of life's conventional comforts, domesticity thus prevailed: women fold quilts and tidy up cellars filled with provisions; doctors examine children in small trailer clinics; couples go to church services. And so on.

Of course, there's despondency. It's the Great Depression, after all. But despair is an oblique presence. It's sensed, rather than witnessed, in the tired, leathery skin of many of these subjects and in their alternately forlorn and tight smiles hiding what must have been quiet desperation.

A migratory boy photographed by Lange. Apparently, the boy had been working in the fields since 5 a.m. Much has been made of the documentary power of these and other images by Lange. That's understandable. These are beautiful, unfettered images of a style that would be taken to new heights by a generation of subsequent documentary photographers, as well as filmmakers from John Ford to the socially conscious American cinéastes of the '60s and '70s, such as Arthur Penn.



And as historical footage, they are fascinating, proving that time may move but things don't necessarily change. Look around Oregon today -- 70 years later, itinerant workers still inhabit areas visited by Lange, for example. The Amalgamated Sugar Co. building she photographed looks virtually the same. As do rhapsodic views of the world's longest water carrier, a siphon tube in Malheur

County.

But don't be confused or convinced that these photographs are objective documents, as some argue. There is much truth in them, of course -- we see life as it was lived and presumably without interference by the photographer.

### **Obvious agendas**

But they aren't impartial images. No photograph ever is. We see particular moments. We see what Lange wanted us to see.

We also see what the FSA wanted the public to see.

"It was our job to document the problems of the Depression so that we could justify the New Deal legislation that was designed to alleviate them," said photographer Arthur Rothstein.

As a critic, and ultimately fan, of these images, I've no problem with that reasoning. It happens to restate why photographs are powerful weapons for discourse, and it's not because they communicate through the most compelling, accessible terms, namely an image that suggests the physical tangibility of people and things.

It's because photographs allow us to see events through the lens, or eyes, of other storytellers -- things we otherwise would miss.

But there's also this to consider: "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have," wrote Susan Sontag, who theorized convincingly about photography, in particular Lange and "Migrant Mother." "It turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed."

### **The FSA's intent**

Through Lange's lens, that symbolic possession wasn't a bad thing. Roy Stryker, who administered the FSA's photography project and hired Lange, wanted the farmers and migrant workers to be portrayed with dignity.

If you think that's rose-tinted cliché or hackneyed subjectivity at work, you're cynical.

To me, the most powerful image in this exhibit shows a young woman standing in the middle of a dirt road. Her hands are gently clasped near her chest; she wears a skirt and her bobbed hair is slightly ruffled. She smiles shyly, as if slightly embarrassed. She's just finished washing up, apparently.

Even in the Depression, when many Americans lost everything, from life possessions to life savings, they didn't lose the image of their best selves, their composure.

Let's keep thinking that way.

– **D.K. Row**



# THEN & NOW

Depression-era photo shows West Linn woman as a child

**Steve Haske**  
Vanguard staff

West Linn resident Rachel Baker-Reinertsen poses with a Depression-era photograph of herself and her parents outside of her father's church in Dead Ox Flat, Ore.

The photograph—part of a series of Dorothea Lange photos taken in 1939 that opened for display in Portland State's Littman Gallery on Oct. 1—is one of two Lange took of Reinertsen's family during a two-month stint in the Pacific Northwest.

Reinertsen, now 68, was honored with a print of her family standing in front of the church with its congregation at an exhibit event held last night by PSU Friends of History and the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission in the gallery.

She had not known about the existence of the photographs until about a month ago, Reinertsen said.

"I just think it's really neat that they're doing this," Reinertsen said. "And I hope others step forward."

So far other children in Lange's photographs have come forward.



All photos by Adam Wickham/Portland State

**Memories:** (Above) Photo by Dorothea Lange of 2-year-old Rachel Baker-Reinertsen with her father. (Below) Baker-Reinertsen at the Littman Gallery.

**Portland State University Vanguard – 2<sup>nd</sup> Story on Dorothea Lange Exhibition**

**Note: Rachel Baker-Reinertsen pictured in the 1939 Dorothea Lange photo taken in Malheur County and 70 years later at the opening at Portland State University's Littman Gallery in October 2009**





# Capital Press

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## Photos capture hard workers, hard lives

*Dorothea Lange's historical images from America's Great Depression to be featured in exhibit*

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Dorothea Lange was one of a dozen photographers assigned to record the lives of rural Americans.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration intended to use the photographs to build support for the Farm Security Administration. In all, the photographers produced more than a quarter-million images across the country.

Lange came to the Pacific Northwest in 1939, focusing her camera on agriculture, struggling farmers and migrant workers in Northern California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

Many of those photographs will be the featured exhibit now through Nov. 25 at Littman Gallery on the Portland State University campus. The exhibition, produced by the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission in collaboration with the Portland State University Friends of History, will include other events, including a lecture and a multimedia presentation. All the events are free.

Lange's best-known portrait is "Migrant Mother," which became a photographic icon of the Depression. Taken in California, it depicts a mother, surrounded by her children, gazing into the California distance.

"Lange's portraits capture the spiritual essence of people caught up in something far greater than they can control," exhibit coordinator David Horowitz said in Portland State Magazine. "She gets right down into the heart of people and their experiences. That's her strength."

Sponsors are being sought to support the exhibit.



Dorothea Lange/Farm Service Administration/Library of Congress

"Migratory boy, aged eleven, and his grandmother work side by side picking hops. Started work at five a.m. Photograph made at noon. Temperature 105 degrees. Oregon, Polk County, near Independence."

it. For a \$500 contribution, a sponsor will receive an archival quality professional print of his or her chosen image.

After the Portland State University dates, the exhibition will travel around Oregon, especially to rural communities where Lange took her photos.

— Steve Brown

**Current Exhibition**  
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# Heroic portraits of sweat and skill

Capital Press staff writer Steve Brown, Capital Press, October 23, 2009 E-mail: [sbrown@capitalpress.com](mailto:sbrown@capitalpress.com).

My dad grew up on a farm in Oklahoma in the 1920s and '30s. I asked him once, "What did y'all raise?"

His answer: "Dust, mostly."

I never saw any pictures of him doing chores or working the fields, but a recent exhibition of photos from that era brought to mind what his life might have been like. They're not pretty pictures.

Dorothea Lange was one of a dozen photographers assigned by the Farm Security Administration to cover the lives of rural Americans in the 1930s. The team covered the map to produce a quarter-million images of migrant workers, hardscrabble farmers, share-croppers - a cross-section of hardship.

Faces etched by harsh climate, deprivation and discouragement peered into the lens of Lange's camera. Many of those eyes - the windows of the soul - say a weary "I'm just tired." Others reveal a strength and resolve that dust and mud and sweat cannot hide.

As part of Portland State University's photo exhibition, Linda Gordon, author and professor of history at New York University, lectured on Lange's life and work.

Lange was self-taught in photography, Gordon said. Her portrait studio in San Francisco catered mostly to the wealthy elite, who were attracted to Lange's focus on individuality. As Lange's growing social consciousness drew her into the streets and soup lines of the Depression, those same skills put a human face on inhuman conditions.

Lange's assignment brought her to the rural Pacific Northwest, where her subjects were often pictured in the midst of their work, prying a living from the land with sweat and skill. The women, Gordon said, are shown "creating civilization amid primitiveness." The children are at once carefree and desperate.

Young and old, smiling and grimacing, worn out and vibrant, these faces are dirty and treated with dignity.

"To Lange, these people were the salt of the earth," Gordon said.

I call them heroes. Amid dust and mud, poverty and hunger, these were people who kept getting back up on their feet. Whether it was strength of character, work ethic or faith, they found a reason to keep moving.

Times are hard again. Many folks are under more pressure than they've ever known, whether their tribulation is economic or moral or spiritual. But looking at the faces of heroes in the midst of Depression, hope stirs.

Four dozen of Dorothea Lange's photos are on display through Nov. 25 at Portland State University's Smith Memorial Student Union.

After that, the exhibition will be available for touring to other communities, not only in Oregon but also throughout the Pacific Northwest. David Milholland, of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, says interested groups are encouraged to contact him at [encanto@ochcom.org](mailto:encanto@ochcom.org)



## Life/Entertainment

### Dorothea Lange's Oregon photos exhibited

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Photographer Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) is best known for her portrait of a young migrant mother in California, stoically resting chin in hand while her children huddle close to her. [More](#)



StatesmanJournal.com  
OREGON'S MID-WILDERNESS VOICE

October 18, 2009

## Dorothea Lange's Oregon photos exhibited

*By Barbara Curtin  
Statesman Journal*

Photographer Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) is best known for her portrait of a young migrant mother in California, stoically resting chin in hand while her children huddle close to her.

But Lange also captured the effects of the Great Depression in Oregon. Forty of those images, printed large, are on display at Portland State University.

Lange was one of a dozen photographers hired to document conditions in rural America. Their mission was to build support for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs. As part of that, Lange traveled around Oregon.

In West Stayton, Lange captured a young girl at a bean pickers' camp, standing solemnly in front of the tent and makeshift shelving that she called home.

In Yamhill County, Lange photographed seven farmers who had cooperatively purchased a piece of equipment, their sunburned faces and worn dungarees speaking volumes. In Independence, she caught a man laughing in front of a storefront, a reminder that people found things to enjoy in the midst of their troubles.

Lange didn't simply take great pictures; she also took notes that told small stories. A photo of an 11-year-old boy picking hops in Polk County noted that he was working alongside his grandmother and the temperature was 105 degrees at noon.

Photographing a hop picker and two skinny children at a paymaster's shack near Grants Pass, Lange recorded how much the young woman had earned for her morning's work — 42 cents — and what that bought — a pound of bologna, a pack of cigarettes and a cake.

The Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, which produced the PSU exhibition, has the images on its Web site, minus Lange's captions. The exhibit is a timely reflection on how Oregonians have weathered hard times and survived.

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# A compelling photo exhibit draws hundreds to Bay City

BY DEAN ANDERSON  
*Headlight Herald*

BAY CITY – An exhibit of Depression-era images by noted photographer Dorothea Lange continues to draw visitors to ArtSpace Gallery.

“We’ve had hundreds of people here to view the exhibit,” said Trisha Kauffman. She and her husband, Craig, own ArtSpace.

“Several groups from Portland have made repeated visits. We’ve had others come from as far away as Alaska and Canada to view Lange’s work,” said Kauffman.

The exhibit, which opened Dec. 1, 2009, will remain at ArtSpace through March 28. It includes 48 photographs taken by Lange in 1939.

Called “the Farm Security Administration’s best-known photographer,” Lange was born Dorothea Nutzhorn in Hoboken, N.J., in 1895.

At age 7, she was stricken with polio, which left her with an ever-so-slight, lifelong limp.

Unwilling to abandon her goal of becoming a photographic artist, Lange managed to secure work as a photographer’s assistant with various studios in New York. At the same time, she furthered her education at Columbia Univer-



DEAN ANDERSON/HEADLIGHT HERALD

**Craig Kauffman, co-owner of ArtSpace Gallery in Bay City, examines one of Dorothea Lange’s 48 Depression-era photographs currently on exhibit there.**

sity.

Taking her mother’s maiden name after her father abandoned the family when she was 12, Lange moved up the photo industry ranks, from a job at a photo supply house in

San Francisco to creating portraits of the social elite.

It was during the early 1930s that Lange was drawn to capture images of the destitute, the downtrodden and the migrant farm families, many

having moved West following the destructive Dust Bowl of 1935.

Doing so became her passion.

See **PHOTO**, Page A11

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## PHOTO: *Continued from Page A1*

Hired by the U.S. Resettlement Division of Information, later by its Historical Section, and finally by the Farm Security Administration, Lange traveled to Oregon in 1939. She produced more than 500 photographs of Oregonians living in the Columbia Basin, Willamette Valley, and in Josephine, Malheur and Klamath counties.

Asked in 1964 about the most significant thing she had gleaned from her years as a photographer, Lange said, "I many times encountered courage, real courage, undeniable courage, in unexpected places."

She died Oct. 11, 1965.

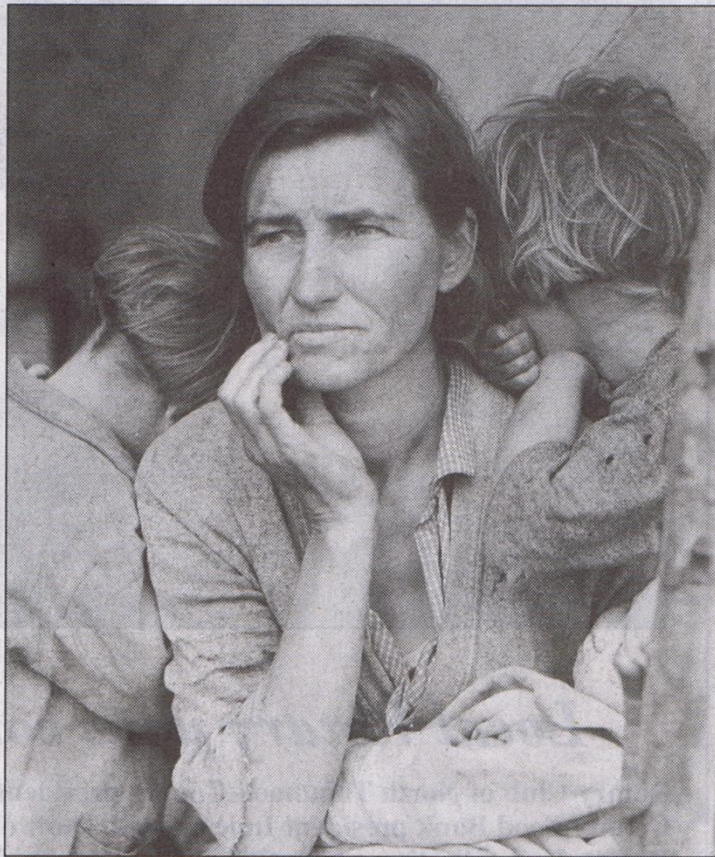
The show of her work made its debut at Portland State University in October 2009 and came to Bay City in December.

Kauffman said she knew little of Lange's work until coming across a book containing photographs of the Japanese American internment during World War II, "Impounded - The Censored Images of the Japanese American Internment."

Lange's images had not been made available to the public until 2006.

Another book on Lange's historical imagery, "Dorothea Lange - A Life Beyond Limits," edited by Linda Gordon, came out last year.

The day before the show



COURTESY PHOTO

**"Migrant Mother," taken in 1936, is considered Lange's most widely acclaimed photograph.**

closes March 28, a special presentation of Lange's work will be held at the Bay City Arts Center from 2 to 3 p.m. Participants March 27 will include David Horowitz, a professor at Portland State University; author and historian Gloria Myers; David Mil-

holland, president of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission; and Dory Hylton, a historian and jazz vocalist.

Lange's exhibit can be viewed seven days a week, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., at ArtSpace, 9120 5th St.





## Seeing Dignity in Poverty

### Dorothea Lange's politics of respect.

BY JULIA BAIRD



ASKED IN 1964 about the most significant thing she had learned about Americans while photographing those fleeing the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, Dorothea Lange answered: "I

many times encountered courage, real courage. Undeniable courage." She saw it often, she said, "in unexpected places." She attempted to capture it as well, of course, in her stark black-and-white images of somber migrant farm workers, strong-jawed mothers, fly-dotted toddlers, and gaunt sharecroppers. By showing the stoicism of her subjects, Lange restored dignity to the dispossessed during the Great Depression.

As Linda Gordon points out in her excellent new biography, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, the photographs Lange took of the "handsome homeless" symbolized the way the architects of the New Deal analyzed the Depression, so that widespread poverty was no longer blamed on poor people but on financial mismanagement: "The economy, not the people, needed moral reform." Lange's subjects were poor, but also disciplined, hardworking, and upright. And quite beautiful.

These images, taken as Lange explored rural California and the Midwest in her dusty Ford station wagon on behalf of the New Deal's Farm Security Administration, serve as a striking reminder of how subversive it can be simply to view people with respect. Lange chose attractive subjects, Gordon writes, "but she also found the attractiveness in everyone," through courtesy, not flattery. And, when her subjects were uneducated, exhausted, hungry farm work-

ers, "her respect for them became a political statement."

After *The San Francisco News* published photographs of starving pea pickers, existing on stolen frozen vegetables because a cold spell had destroyed their crop (the iconic "Migrant Mother" was one of them), there was a deluge of public donations. Shortly afterward, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration provided funding for two emergency migrant-worker camps in California. No wonder FDR's critics slammed these photos as sentimental propaganda.

The contrast to today is stark. Last year the number of Americans living in poverty peaked at 13.2 percent, the highest in 11 years. The greatest drop in income has been among lower- and middle-income earners. But poor people appear in the mainstream media only when they are obese, sick, or sad: powerless and to be pitied. Stories center on their lack of jobs, homes, and health insurance, or how some now live in motels or storage units.

Throughout the recession, we have remained largely obsessed with rich people; whether lauding or castigating them, our gaze has been primarily focused on the excesses and excuses of Wall Street. The well-off have not just received most of our attention, but also most of our aid, which means that those responsible for the crisis have been the least affected. Charities have also suffered. A Pew survey found that over the past two years attitudes have hardened toward the poor. In 2007, asked if the government should do more to help

the needy, 54 percent said yes. This dropped to 48 percent in March this year.

A year ago there was much talk of how this recession might cause us to redefine—or remember—what it means to be American, recast our values, and to "put aside childish things," as President Obama said. But there is little evidence this has happened. The voices calling for a more civic-minded, prudent, and decent culture have grown quiet as our eyes strain looking for green shoots and fat cats.

Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, said, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste," but the president has yet to succeed at creating a broader narrative about America and the need for reform. He promised to protect the weak, and this remains his challenge. Lange's wage was paid by Franklin Roose-

velt's New Deal—she prodded the public in return, and evoked their sympathy by humanizing the poor. Both politician and photographer attempted to build a public culture based on respect, not shame. By doing this, they reminded America what being American meant.

This is why it is so sobering, in the worst downturn since the Depression, to think of the woman who limped through rural America 70 years ago with a leg gnarled by childhood polio, her hair stuck under a spotted scarf, and snapped the impoverished and displaced until she found their beauty. Her greatest lesson, perhaps, was about dignity. A portrait, she said in 1965, is a "lesson in how one human being should approach one another."

Courage, real courage. You hope to see it sometimes, in unexpected places.

Poor people appear in the mainstream media only when they are obese, sick, or sad: powerless and to be pitied.