

Russell Lee Chronology (1903-1965)

- 1903 July 21** **Russell Lee born in Ottawa, Illinois** to Burton Lee and Adeline Werner Lee
- 1908** Parents divorce, Russell moves with mother into home of grandparents Eva & Charles Werner; father moves to Chicago
- 1913** Mother Adeline killed in Chicago traffic accident; Russell an eyewitness
- 1914** In Berlin with grandparents, grandmother Eva ill; there when WWI erupts
- 1916 early** Grandmother Eva Pope Werner dies of illness; Russell lives uncomfortably with grandfather
- 1917 fall** Has new guardian, grandmother Eva's brother Milton Pope, but no home for him there
- 1917-1921** Attends Culver Military Academy, Culver, Indiana each fall-spring school year
- 1918** Brings a friend to Culver, Ryburn Sessler, who comes with a Buick runabout – great freedom
- summer Lives with grandfather Charles Werner last time
- 1919 summer** Works for another uncle in Ottawa painting auto undercoats; guardian Milton Pope dies; court appoints Horace Hall as 2nd guardian
- 1920 summer** Attends Reserve Officers Training Corps; passed to third legal guardian Burton Jordan who with his wife creates a home for Russell
- 1921-1925** Attends Lehigh University, builds good academic record; reconnects with father
- 1925** Graduates with degree in Chemical Engineering; takes first job with Certainteed Products Company in Versailles, Illinois making composition roofing
- 1927** Marries Doris Emrick, painter & graduate of Rockford College; 6-week honeymoon in France
- 1928 early** Lees move to Kansas City; Russell bored with Certainteed job becomes weekend painter; Doris enrolls at Kansas City Art Institute
- 1929** Inherits income from several of his granduncle's farms
- Oct Lees move to San Francisco one week before stock market crash; they join circle of friends that includes Diego Rivera and Arnold Blanch
- 1931-1936** Lees move to Woodstock, NY; they spend summers there & winter in NYC where both study at Art Students' League
- 1933** Lees return to Europe for several months; Doris studies in Paris; Russell travels to USSR, Eastern Europe & Germany, where he sketches but is unsatisfied with his work
- 1935** **Buys first camera, 35 mm Cortax**; associates with Konrad Cramer who studied at Bauhaus & Emil Ganso; grows very engaged, mixes own chemicals, pushes ASA 35 film to ASA 100; Doris wins prestigious Frank Logan Prize, Chicago Art Institute
- winter Walks NYC streets, trying to express visually the poverty and misery he sees
- 1936** Adds Harlem to his beat, sees & attempts to capture "sheer joy in life" amid poverty; retains an agent & starts to sell photos to magazines; begins to shoot "series" of photos – moving toward the photo essay...years later Roy Stryker pins it down: "Russell Lee is a taxonomist with a camera... He takes apart and gives you all the details of a plant." Not a cold scientific style – a 'poetry of discourse' more discursive in a literary sense
- spring



A Christmas Dinner, Smithfield, Ohio, 1936

1936 Meets Willard Morgan & attends meetings of *The Circle of Confusion*, a group interested in photo medium technically; becomes friends with Harold Harvey who pushes film further; **“That was it,” Russell realizes, “I was devoting all my time to photography.”**

summer Through artist friend Ben Shahn meets Roy Stryker, head of the Resettlement Administration documentary photography section & shows him work; Stryker soon sends Lee to photograph Jersey Homesteads housing project. **That work leads Russell to a full-time job with the RA.**

1936 fall First trip to the upper-Midwest – Wisconsin, Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota – Russell’s home ground; takes first ‘classic’ photo “A Christmas Dinner” in Smithfield, Ohio

1937 Roy Stryker visits Lee in Duluth, Minnesota, shows him prints of many month’s photography for the first time and they develop a working relationship.

Resettlement Administration renamed Farm Security Administration (FSA), becoming an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

May Visits Woodstock, NY & his wife Doris; then returns to Washington DC

fall Back in upper Midwest – Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Montana

1938 Russell and Doris Lee divorce; his photographic career has become all-consuming, as has her painting career.

later On assignment to New Orleans meets young newspaperwoman Jean Smith, who in soon teams up with and later that year marries Russell. They work together in the south – Louisiana, Missouri.

1939 Photography for FSA in Texas, Oklahoma & Louisiana

1940 “San Augustine, Texas” series published as March feature in *Travel* magazine; takes famous Pie Town, New Mexico series, as well as photos in Arizona & Texas

1941 Assignments in Rural Oregon and urban Illinois – takes photos in south Chicago for *Twelve Million Black Voices*, an FSA publication suggested by Gordon Parks

Oct *U.S. Camera* magazine publishes “Pie Town, NM” series as a major feature.

Dec Photographs Shasta Dam construction on FSA contract with Office of Emergency Management

Dec 7 Attack on Pearl Harbor; U.S. quickly enters WWII on side of the Allies

1942 March Covers exodus of Japanese-Americans from Los Angeles on FSA assignment in contract with the Office of War Information (OWI); visits Tule Lake Internment camp in northern California

summer **Takes Photos of Japanese-American agricultural camps in Nyssa, Malheur County, Oregon and Shelley, Rupert & Twin Falls, Idaho, on FSA contract with OWI**



Hobbs, New Mexico, 1940



Chicago, Illinois, 1941

- later Takes photos of tungsten mining in West; a Portuguese religious festival near San Jose;
Russell ends his years of FSA employment.
- 1943 Jan 31** Commissioned Captain in the Air Transport Command; receives training in Florida
- later Flies and takes photos across planet – Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Brazil, Ascension Island, Accra, Dakar in North Africa, across the Sahara to Marrakesh and more – photographing air strips, however small, that could be used by American pilots. Then on to Cairo, the Middle East, Khartoum, Adan, Karachi and finally back through Africa and South America to U.S.
- Sept 14 Roy Stryker resigns FSA after getting all its images into the Library of Congress.
- 1944** Promoted to Major; encouraged to take photos of living conditions on bases & among nearby native populations; another major trip to base in New Delhi, with photos of air fields in Ceylon, Assam, and ‘over the hump’ to China to take images as part of an assessment of the suitability of China as a launching pad on Japan
- 1945 Aug** Released from Air Transport Command; Lees head west & stay near Austin for 8 months
- 1946 summer** Lees move to Lake City, Colorado yet return to Washington DC where Russell takes photo assignment for the Coal Mines Administration – on the road with Jean Aug 1946 to Feb ’47 – shoots 4,000 4x5 negatives of extremely high quality.
- 1947 Feb** Move back to Austin, Texas when Russell diagnosed with an ulcer dating from early WWII; photos in *The Coal Miner and his Family* and *A Medical Survey of the Bituminous Coal Industry* – some 300 Lee photos employed in fight to clean up bad conditions in coal mining.
- Later Takes job with Standard Oil of New Jersey (SONJ) under Roy Stryker supervision
- Late Takes photos for story on seismographic crews in the swamps of Louisiana; “The Swamp Shooters” appears in SONJ magazine *The Lamp* and more than 200 newspapers and magazines
- 1948+** Continues shooting for SONJ, initially several stories in Texas, Utah, and beyond appearing in *The Lamp*
- 1948** Jean directs campaign for ex-New-Dealer Ralph Yarborough, Russell donates 100s of photos to Ralph’s various campaigns, including a losing 1954 campaign for Governor and a successful 1957 Special Senatorial Race campaign for the U.S. Senate
- 1949-1962** Instructor at 2nd University of Missouri Photo-Workshop; Lees co-direct Workshop 1955-’62
- 1950** Shoots refineries; story with several color photos appears in May & June *Fortune* magazine
- 1950-1952** Works with University of Texas on a major study of the Spanish-speaking people of state



Celilo Falls, Oregon, 1941



Pie Town, New Mexico, 1940

- 1953** Jean & Russell travel by freighter down the West Coast and up the East Coast of South America – four months and 23 stops – Russell takes very few photos
- 1954** Takes photos for Jones & Laughlin Steel Company in Pittsburg
- 1950s mid** Contributing associate member of Magnum photographic cooperative; Russell contributes to many *Texas Observer* stories – **“What the hell...it was work that just had to be done.”**
- 1955** Spends 3 months in Saudi Arabia for Aramco – Arabian American Oil Company
- 1956** Covers primary campaign for the Texas governorship, used in *New York Times Magazine*
- 1956-1957** Takes photos for SONJ annual reports including travels all over Europe
- 1959** Lees travel months by tramp steamer around Mediterranean
- 1960** Travels to Italy to create photo portfolio for a friend William Arrowsmith’s story in the U of Texas magazine, travels with friends and as a tourist; 150 of his 4,000 photos, nearly all in B&W, used in the September 1961 *Texas Quarterly* issue, subtitled “The Image of Italy”
- 1964** Marion Davis, Curator of the University of Texas Art Museum, commissions a Lee show
- 1965** **In the spring, after working a year on it, Russell presents more than 400 prints spanning 30 years of history and personal growth; UT Art Department asks him to teach a photo course**
- fall First UT class; within a year word was out that Lee taught a ‘wonderful photography course’ tailored to the specific needs of a group of art-oriented neophytes – “The emphasis on seeing, not on technique, although we will acquire adequate technique as we go along. I hope to sharpen their perception.” “I stress the *now*.” **Russell Lee made teaching the central focus of his life between the years 1965 and 1973, throwing himself into it totally.**
- 1966** Lees buy a car in Geneva, drive north to Copenhagen, fly to Bergen, sail north on a mailboat
- 1973** Compulsory retirement at 70 from University of Texas; maintains links with former students
- 1975** Lees fly to Canada, Russell photographs seals in the Gulf of St. Lawrence
- 1986 Aug 28** **Russell Lee dies in Austin, Texas**



Tent Camp, Shelley, Idaho, 1942 [not a high-resolution scan]

“If a job didn’t really engage my interest, I didn’t take the job. My first responsibility was to myself.”
Russell Lee, interview with F. Jack Hurley, May 15-17, 1973, Austin, Texas

Chronology adapted from: *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties*, F. Jack Hurley, Louisiana State University Press, 1972, Da Capo Press, 1977

All photos included above taken by Russell Lee appear in Hurley’s book, were taken for the Resettlement Administration / FSA, and are available via the Library of Congress website