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Photographer Dorothea Lange is honored for her innovative spirit



"Pea harvest. Family at work, Nipomo, California." spring 1937. (Credit line: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Divisions, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-016363-C) Library of Congress - Dorothea Lange

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'You put your camera around your neck along with putting on your shoes, and there it is, an appendage of the body that shares your life with you. The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.'

-- Dorothea Lange

Three-quarters of a century has passed since Dorothea Lange looked into the eyes of a migrant mother and captured the despair and determination of a depressed nation.

Today, Lange will become the second photographer inducted into the California Hall of Fame at the California Museum for History, Women and the Arts in Sacramento.

Lange will join contemporaries Ansel Adams and writer John Steinbeck in the hall established in 2006 to honor legendary people who embody California's innovative spirit and have made their mark on history -- inductees as diverse as Ronald Reagan, César Chávez, Jonas Salk, Amelia Earhart, Walt Disney and Willie Mays.

Dorothea Lange was seven hours from home when she passed a crude sign on U.S. Highway 101 north of Santa Maria that rainy March morning in 1936:

"Pea-pickers camp."

Lange, 41, had been on the road for a month, working 14 hours a day photographing migrant farmworkers for the federal Resettlement Administration. Now, her work was done, her cameras packed and her heart set on home. Twenty miles down the road, "following instinct, not reason," Lange turned around and drove back to the hamlet of Nipomo. At the end of a muddy road in a forlorn collection of tents, she locked eyes with Florence Owens Thompson.

Florence Owens Thompson was 32 years old when the late-model car driven by the well-dressed woman pulled up to her tent in Nipomo on March 9, 1936. Thompson and her husband, Cleo Owens, had left Oklahoma 12 years earlier to pursue a succession of sawmill jobs in California. Married at age 17, the full-blooded Cherokee mother already had three children in tow when she



Seven decades ago, the Dust Bowl migration brought more than 70,000 people to Modesto and other parts of the San Joaquin Valley.



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arrived in the Golden State at age 20.

#### **Approached as if 'drawn by a magnet'**

The stock market crash of 1929 sent Owens to work in the fields and orchards of Northern California, where he died two years later at age 32. Thompson's brood numbered seven children the day she met Dorothea Lange in Nipomo. Six of them had been on the migrant labor trail with Florence the past two years. On this late winter morning in 1936, cold weather had killed the pea crop and her car had broken down. As soon as she could, Thompson was prepared to move on. She would later settle in Modesto.

Prior to her death in 1965, Lange recalled approaching "the hungry and desperate mother as if drawn by a magnet." A decade later, Thompson would remember Lange taking pictures as she stepped ever closer.

"Pay her no mind," Thompson recalled saying to herself. "The woman thinks I'm quaint and wants to take my picture."

"I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her," Lange said, "but I do remember she asked no questions."

Having determined Thompson's age and circumstance -- "living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields and birds the children had killed" -- Lange concluded "she ... seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it."

The face of Florence Thompson, America's "Migrant Mother," graced the pages of the San Francisco News paper almost immediately after the encounter in Nipomo.

Public reaction was instantaneous. Within days, the pea-picker camp had received 20,000 pounds of food from the federal government. By then, their car repaired, the Florence Thompson family had moved on to the next harvest. More than 40 years would pass before her name was attached to what millions came to revere as the "face" of the Great Depression.

Recognition for Lange arrived as fast as the food trucks in Nipomo. For the next four years, now photographing for the Farm Security Administration, Lange feared that "Migrant Mother" would brand her a one-hit wonder.

The concern proved unfounded. Documenting migrant workers from the cotton fields of Alabama to Modesto's "skid row," Lange went on to create an unprecedented body of work for the FSA. As the social relief programs of Roosevelt's New Deal took hold, she also covered improvements such as the federal labor camp that opened in Westley in 1939.

In concert with such notables as Jack Delano, Walker Evans, Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein, Lange and the FSA team drew the blueprint for modern photojournalism. While most responsible for creating the national image of the Depression, no one employed by the FSA made a nickel in royalties for their work. All of it, "Migrant Mother" included, was provided as a service to advance New Deal programs for social reform.

Today, the vast majority of the FSA and ensuing Office of War Information photographs are part of the public domain, available through the Library of Congress. Lange's personal archive is housed at the Oakland Museum of California.

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