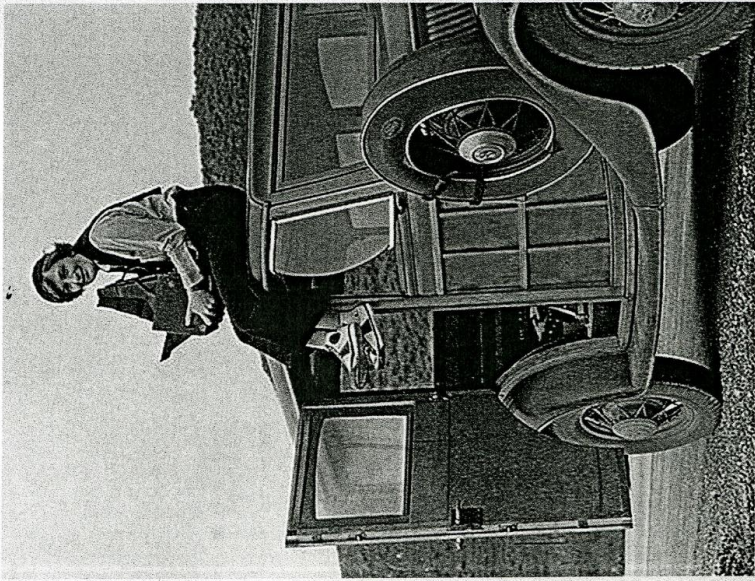


"Years of Dust" by Albert Marrin

An American Icon

The image known as "Migrant Mother" became an American icon. Today we find it in textbooks and on museum posters, T-shirts, and Mother's Day cards. In 1998 it appeared on a 32-cent commemorative postage stamp titled, "America Survives the Depression." That same year, a copy of the photo with Lange's handwriting on it sold at auction for \$244,500.



Dorothea Lange, Resettlement Administration photographer, in California. February 1936. just a month before she took

Dorothea Lange focused on people rather than on the land. A rarity at a time when nearly all professional photographers were men, she was a well-known portrait photographer with her own studio in San Francisco. During the Great Depression, her interests shifted to the unfolding human tragedy. Lange began by taking her camera to the streets. There she photographed breadlines, soup kitchens, and protests by the unemployed. While documenting the lives of Dust Bowl refugees for the Farm Security Administration, she took what is perhaps the most famous image of Depression-era America. Titled "Migrant Mother," it is also a marvelous example of how photographs do not always tell the whole story of what they are supposed to portray. If only for that reason, "Migrant Mother" bears closer study.

In March 1936, Lange was driving home to San Francisco after completing a job. Along the way, she passed a crude sign announcing PEA-PICKERS CAMP. She kept going. Yet she could not forget the sign, or the stories that might lay behind it. Twenty minutes later, she made a U-turn on the empty highway. At the town of Nipomo, she turned onto a muddy road and found a camp with some 2,500 migrant workers. A cold snap had killed the pea crop, and they would have to search for work elsewhere.

Leaving her car, Lange saw a mother seated in a canvas lean-to with a baby in her arms and two other children huddled around her. The woman seemed stunned and despairing over her family's plight. Lange told what happened next:

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. . . . I did not ask her name or history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living