

## *I Am Trying Here to Say Something*

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) had a hard childhood. Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, she fell ill with polio at the age of seven and walked with a limp for the rest of her life. Dorothea took up photography as a teenager and was a natural. A critic recalled, "She could look at something: a line of laundry flapping in the wind, a pair of old, wrinkled, worn-out hands, a breadline, a crowd of people in a bus station, and find it beautiful. Her eye was a camera lens and her camera—as she put it—an 'appendage of the body.'"

Most famous for her marvelous photographs of Depression-era America, Lange continued to document American life into World War II, including a photographic record of the government's internment of Japanese-Americans. Eventually she went on to found a photography magazine called *Aperture*.

Of her work, Lange once said, "I am trying here to say something about the despised, the defeated, the alienated. About death and disaster, about the wounded, the crippled, the helpless, the rootless, the dislocated. About finality. About the last ditch."<sup>7</sup>

frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children had killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.<sup>4</sup>

Forty years later, the two older children in Lange's photo remembered the incident differently. Their mother was Florence Owens Thompson, a full-blooded Native American who had left Oklahoma ten years earlier, and so was no Dust Bowl refugee, as the photo suggests. The family had not been living on frozen peas and dead birds. Nor had Mrs. Thompson sold her tires. Her husband had taken the car for repairs, and she had moved to the pea camp from another camp. Before leaving, she left word for her husband to come to the new location. She looked worried in the picture because she was not sure he got the message.

Lange, the children recalled, had promised not to publish the photo, but had done exactly that. It appeared on March 10, 1936, in the *San Francisco News*, above First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's weekly "My Day" column. Thompson saw the picture and felt betrayed. For the rest of her life, she resented Lange's use of her image for publicity. Thompson was an active woman, who had helped organize farmworkers' unions. "She was a very strong woman," said daughter Katherine, seen in the photo by her mother's right shoulder. "She was a leader. I think that's one of the reasons she resented the photo—because it didn't show her in that light."<sup>5</sup> "What upsets us is that people are making money out of our mother's pain,"<sup>6</sup> said daughter Katherine. Yet Lange's photo and Lorentz's film, as well as works by other photographers, served a worthwhile purpose. Better than any printed speech, they taught Americans about the need to protect the land.