

*Dorothea Lange was a photographer who worked during the Depression in the 1930s, when there was much poverty and hardship in the United States. Read the selection about Dorothea Lange and answer the questions that follow.*

## **Dorothea Lange**

1895–1965

*by Leslie Sills*

1 Dorothea Lange once said, “A camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.” She was committed to helping people in trouble. By photographing them, she hoped to awaken and inspire the more fortunate to help, too. That is why her pictures are called documentary, a word that comes from the Latin root *docere*, meaning “to teach.”

2 Dorothea became passionate about helping people during the Great Depression, when one out of four Americans lost a job. She had a portrait business in San Francisco then, but outside her window she saw unemployed men lined up for free food. She thought these men were tremendously brave as they endured circumstances they could not control. She *had* to capture their feelings.

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3 From 1932 to 1934, Dorothea photographed many of the millions affected by America’s poor economic conditions. During that time, people with jobs suffered because wages were low and hours long. Some protested, and in support, Dorothea photographed their demonstrations. When Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president in 1933, he began programs to help protect Americans and to create jobs for the unemployed.

4 A year later, Dorothea exhibited her photographs publicly for the first time. Her show surprised people. They were not used to seeing photographs of social problems that provoked such strong emotions. Dorothea chose just the right person or people and setting to reflect the pain of many Americans.

5 One person who loved her work was an economics professor named Paul Taylor. Paul was doing research for President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (or WPA). He was trying to help poor Americans in rural areas by talking to them about their lives and then sending reports to the government. When he saw Dorothea’s photographs, he knew his reports

would be more effective if her work accompanied them. Dorothea liked his idea. She was hired by the government as a “typist,” the only job slot available, and went with Paul on his field trips.

- 6 In 1934 and 1935, thousands of farmers from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas left their farms because a terrible drought had killed their crops. The soil was so dry and the wind so fierce that the area became known as the Dust Bowl. These farmers migrated to California, hoping to find better conditions, but there were far too many workers for the number of available jobs. As the Depression continued, the farms that were successful used machines—tractors and harvesters—instead of workers.

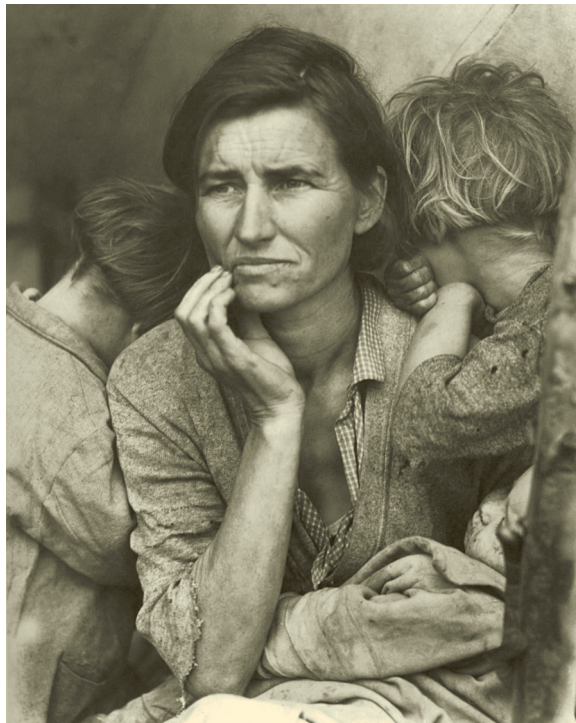
- 7 Dorothea and Paul worked tirelessly, speaking to the migrants and taking pictures. The conditions were shocking. As *Untitled (Migrant Housing, California, c. 1936)* shows, the migrants’ homes were made of whatever they could find: canvas, cardboard, twigs, and even grasses woven between poles. In one report, Dorothea and Paul wrote, “Words cannot describe some of the conditions we saw.”



*Untitled (Migrant Housing, California, c. 1936)*

- 8 When the government officials received the reports along with Dorothea’s photographs, they understood the suffering. President Roosevelt responded quickly. He set up camps with tents and trailers and provided food and clean sanitary facilities. Dorothea’s photographs were among the first in America to lead to government action.
- 9 *Migrant Mother*, 1936, perhaps Dorothea’s most famous photograph, was taken during this time. Dorothea had been photographing for weeks and was anxiously driving home alone in a rainstorm. She passed a sign that said Pea Pickers Camp but was too weary to stop. Twenty miles down the road, she felt she must return. She turned around and drove right in “like a homing pigeon,” she recalled. There she found a rain-soaked woman trying to shelter her children. Along with twenty-five hundred men, women, and children in the camp, this family was trying to survive by eating common birds killed by the children and peas that had frozen on the vine. The family could not leave because the mother had had to sell their car tires to buy food.

10 Dorothea spent ten minutes taking photographs. She took six pictures, talking very little. She learned only that the migrant mother was thirty-two years old and that the father of her seven children was a native of California. Because Dorothea was unsteady on her feet but used a large, heavy camera, each photograph had to be planned quickly. Her first two photographs were taken from a distance and included a teenage daughter. With each following photograph, Dorothea moved in closer. While all the photos clearly portray the pain of this family's life, the last photograph, known as *Migrant Mother*, is the most powerful. Here the mother is the



Migrant Mother, 1936

focus. She looks to the side with her hand held to her mouth as if she is in a state of despair. The children at her sides have turned their heads and are leaning on their mother as if for comfort. Perhaps Dorothea suggested this to avoid including the children's expressions, which she may have feared might compete with their mother's worried look. The baby sleeping on her mother's lap is dirty, further emphasizing their horrible conditions. This composition became a symbol for all suffering families of the Depression.

11 Dorothea drove straight home and rushed to develop and print the film. She quickly sent copies not only to the government but also to a San Francisco newspaper, which distributed them along with a story about the pea pickers to other newspapers. The alarmed United States government hurriedly sent the migrants twenty thousand pounds of food. *Migrant Mother* kept many people from starving.