

NEW DEAL AMERICA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN



Arthur Porter





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This exhibition was made possible through the generous support and assistance of the following:



NEW DEAL AMERICA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN

CURATED BY
ANN ROTHSTEIN SEGAN, PH.D. AND BRODIE HEFNER

ESSAY BY
ANN ROTHSTEIN SEGAN, PH.D.



KINGSBOROUGH ART MUSEUM
BROOKLYN

This catalogue coincides with *New Deal America: Photographs by Arthur Rothstein*, an exhibition organized by the Kingsborough Art Museum at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. The exhibition was on view from March 26 - May 21, 2025.

New Deal America was curated by Dr. Ann Rothstein Segan and Brodie Hefner, and was first presented by The Gage Gallery of Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. Video and historical ephemera have been added to this iteration of the exhibition.

Kingsborough Art Museum
The City University of New York
Dr. Brian E. Hack, Director
Dr. Sarah Dillon, Art Department Chair
www.kccartmuseum.org

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Front Cover: Arthur Rothstein, *Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma*, 1936

Back Cover: Arthur Rothstein, *Self-portrait, Aliquippa, Pennsylvania*, 1938.



DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

On behalf of the Kingsborough Art Museum I welcome you to *New Deal America: Photographs by Arthur Rothstein*. This pioneering photographer, one of the predominant forces of twentieth-century visual culture, is known for many iconic photographs, perhaps none as era-defining as *Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma* (1936). Rothstein's early work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) brought national attention to the environmental catastrophe taking place in the nation's heartland. This exhibit, curated by his daughter, Dr. Ann Rothstein Segan and her husband Brodie Hefner, explores how Arthur Rothstein documented not only the tragedy of the Dust Bowl but the effects of Roosevelt's New Deal, the most daring and significant recovery program ever attempted in America.

The Arthur Rothstein Legacy Project, founded by Segan and Hefner, was pivotal in making this exhibition possible. The couple have curated exhibitions of Rothstein's photographs across the nation, allowing a new generation to discover not only his work but his role in capturing the significant cultural, political, and social events and personalities of the era. *New Deal America* was first exhibited at The Gage Gallery of Roosevelt University in Chicago; for this iteration we have added video footage and ephemeral items such as postcards, newspapers, and sheet music, to further contextualize the era. *New Deal America* was funded in large part through a generous grant from The Hillman Foundation, and I thank them for their generous support of this project.

Arthur Rothstein's photographs continue to resonate and speak to lingering social issues such as poverty, class struggle, wealth inequality, and racial injustice. One of the most poignant photographs in the exhibition, *Artelia Bendolph, Girl at Gee's Bend, Boykin, Alabama* (1937), is haunting not only in terms of its historical importance but also in its dramatic composition. Young Artelia (born 1927) seems trapped within the crowded mud-daubed cabin from which she defiantly stares. Framed within the rough-carpentered window like a Renaissance portrait, she stands in contrast to the torn magazine pages that barely serve as insulation. In the center of the window shutter is a 1936 advertisement for *Cellophane*, in which a stylishly-dressed and bejeweled woman unwraps store-bought bread from plastic packaging produced by Du Pont (illustrated, right). Rothstein poignantly reveals the disparity that lies beneath the veneer of American prosperity through his juxtaposition of abundant consumerism and abject deprivation.

Planned long before the 2024 presidential election, *New Deal America* is presented at an unsettling and deeply divided moment in our nation's history. The very nature and existence of our federal government is being reexamined and redefined in unprecedented and often unsettling ways. We hope that the exhibition's narrative of recovery and renewal offers strength and resilience as we navigate the uncertainty of our current political and social climate. Moreover, we hope Rothstein's desire to reveal life's largely unseen realities inspires you to boldly and honestly document your own era in whatever medium best expresses your vision. The New Deal policies represented in this exhibition helped raise a nation out of the Great Depression, providing assistance and opportunities for countless Americans. This exhibition is dedicated to that democratic spirit of lifting those in need to help them find their voice, identity, and sense of belonging within American life.

Brian E. Hack, Ph.D.
Director, KAM
March 2025



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Advertisement for Cellophane, *Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1936. This image appears in Arthur Rothstein's photograph *Artelia Bendolph, Girl at Gee's Bend, Boykin, Alabama* (1937), illustrated in this catalogue.



NEW DEAL AMERICA
ANN ROTHSTEIN SEGAN

INTRODUCTION

In 1933, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) began his first term in office, the nation was facing economic collapse due to the Great Depression, and a catastrophic drought in the Great Plains. FDR responded with the New Deal, an enormous experiment in creative government. New Deal initiatives provided relief and productive employment for the destitute, fostered recovery from economic collapse, and reformed the role of government to protect vulnerable Americans.

Photography's importance as a means of documenting social conditions reached new heights during the New Deal. One government endeavor exemplified this revolution in visual culture: the photo unit of the Resettlement Administration, which soon became the Farm Security Administration, or "FSA."

The FSA photo unit set a standard for all future documentary photography projects. In the era before television, the unit helped Americans visualize the nation's problems, and what

the government was doing about them. Arthur Rothstein (1915-1985) was the first photographer hired by the FSA. This exhibition provides a glimpse into his enduring contributions to this unprecedented documentary project.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

The banking crisis of the Great Depression was compounded by an ecological crisis. A multi-year drought in the Great Plains—and a heat wave comparable to the summer of 2023—was transforming marginal farmland to near-desert conditions.

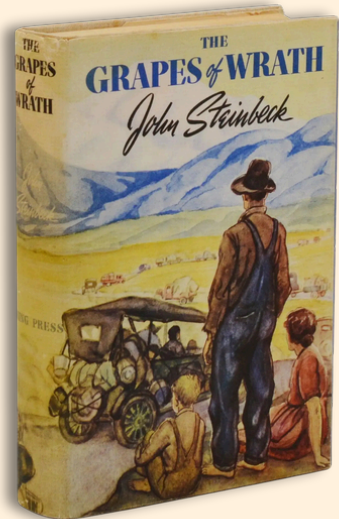
In the preceding decades more than 100 million acres of grasslands had been plowed for planting wheat. This left the fragile topsoil exposed to erosion by wind and—when heavy rain finally arrived—by uncontrolled flooding.

Relentless winds in the high plains raised massive clouds of choking dust. The worst conditions were in the “Dust Bowl” around the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles.

II. AMERICA'S REFUGEES

Rapid changes in agricultural and industrial markets resulted in record-high unemployment during the Great Depression. Millions of Americans forced from their homes took to the road in search of work and a new start.

This real-life saga about America's internal refugees was depicted in popular media of the day. The best known is John Steinbeck's 1939 best-selling book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the fictional family of Tom Joad (played by Henry Fonda in the acclaimed 1940 movie). Steinbeck and the filmmakers drew inspiration from the work of several social documentary photographers, including Arthur Rothstein's images of Dust Bowl conditions and drought refugees traveling west in search of work.



First edition of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), with cover illustration by Elmer Hader (1889-1973).



Lobby card for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), the film adaptation of John Steinbeck's 1939 novel. Directed by John Ford, the film starred Henry Fonda (center, in bib overalls) as the Oklahoma sharecropper Tom Joad. As with many farming families of the 1930s, the Joads made the difficult journey west to California. The film, considered one of the best in cinema history, earned John Ford the Oscar for Best Director in 1941.



Arthur Rothstein, *Sand Piled Up in Front of Outhouse on Farm*. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936.

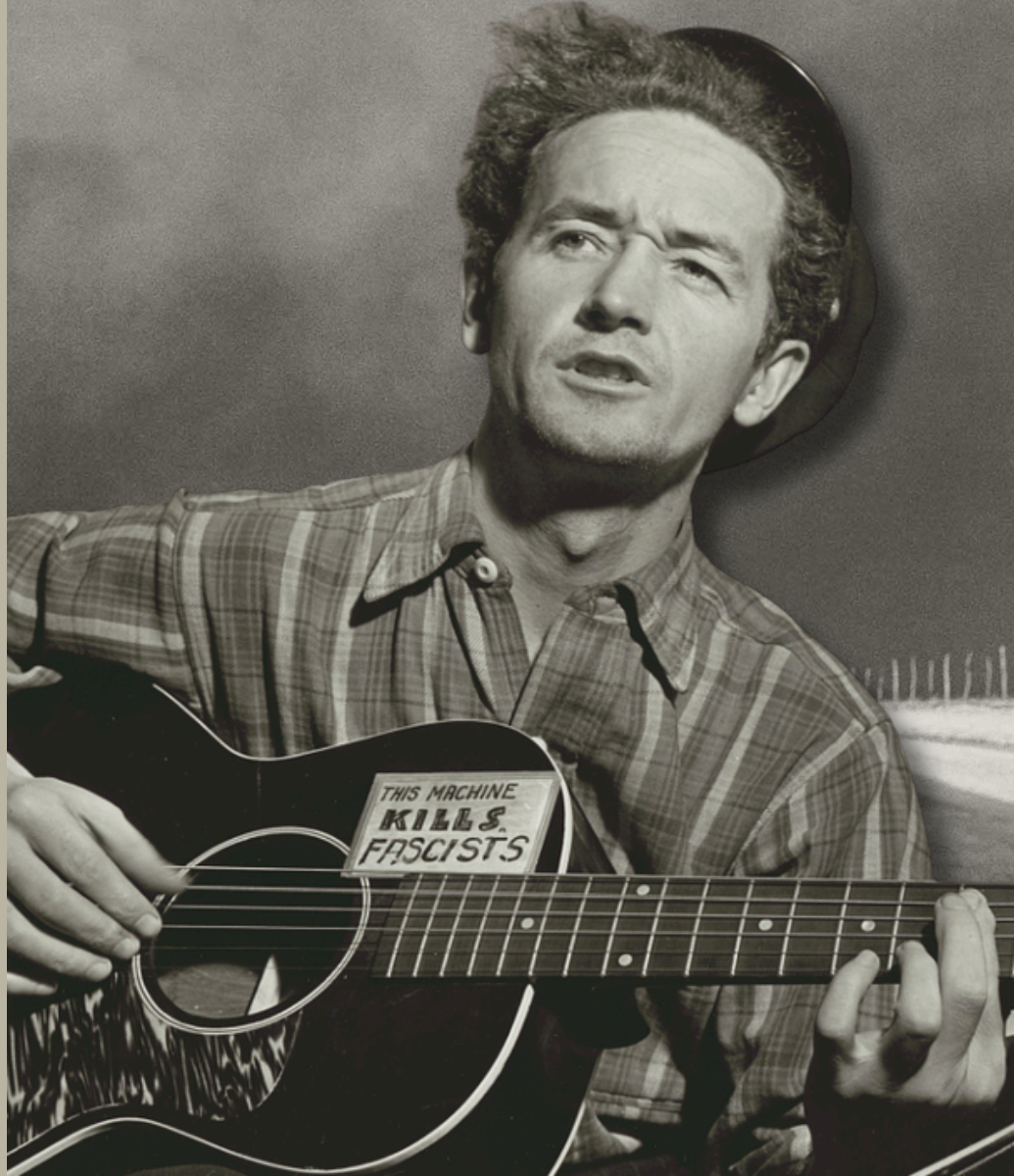
“Many of these people [in our photographs] were sick, hungry, and miserable. The odds were against them, yet their goodness and strength survived.”

-Roy Stryker, Director of the FSA Photo Unit



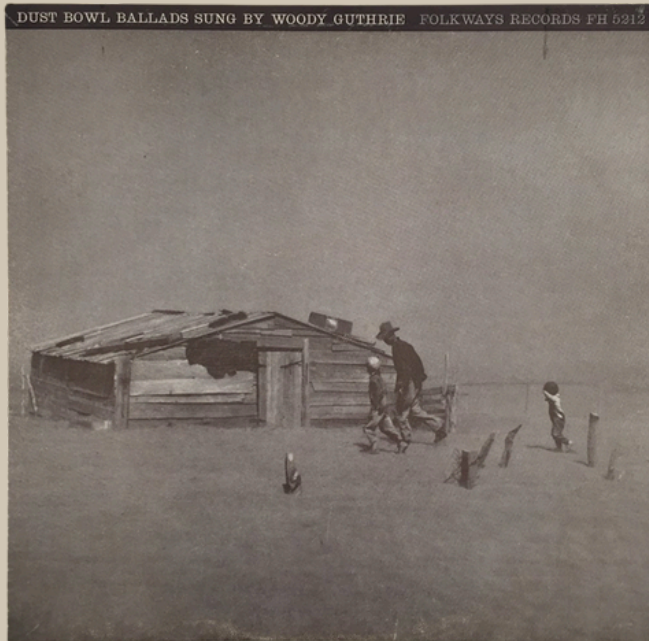
Arthur Rothstein, *J. Huffman Waiting for Better Times in Front of his Closed Store, Grassy Butte, North Dakota, 1936*. This farmer and merchant is likely John Paul Huffman (1877-1965), a storekeeper listed in the 1930 Census as living in McKenzie County, North Dakota with his wife Hattie and three children. Born in Le Roy, Illinois, Huffman headed west at some point before 1910.

WOODY GUTHRIE
DUST BOWL BALLADEER



*I've seen the wind so high that it blowed my fences down,
Buried my tractor six feet underground.*

-Woody Guthrie, *Dust Bowl Blues* (1940)



Dust Bowl Ballads Sung by Woody Guthrie (1964), released by Folkways Records. The album featured songs originally recorded and released by Guthrie in 1940, including *Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues*, *Dust Bowl Refugee*, and *I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore*. Arthur Rothstein's well-known Dust Bowl photograph served as the album's artwork.

III. DETERMINED TO STAY

Although many Americans became refugees due to drought and unemployment, most people suffering hardship during the Great Depression remained in place, clinging to their homes and their land. Across the drought areas, descendants of stubbornly self-reliant pioneers reluctantly accepted government relief to avoid starvation or financial ruin.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, himself a gentleman farmer, sympathized with the plight of the rural poor. He could not make it rain, but his New Deal Farm Security Administration could, and did, provide relief grants, loans, and technical assistance that helped families persevere through the worst years of the crisis.

Opposite: Arthur Rothstein, *Artelia Bendolph, Girl at Gee's Bend*. Boykin, Alabama, 1937.

Artelia Bendolph (1927-2003) was around ten years old at the time Rothstein captured her in this powerful, dramatically composed image. Census records from this period list her as living on her a farm rented by her grandfather in Gee's Bend, with thirteen relatives. Unlike many families who traveled west, the Bendolphins remained in Gee's Bend. Artelia Bendolph spent her later years in Prichard, Alabama, where she passed away in 2003.



IV. A NEW DEAL FOR WORKERS

FDR and his supporters helped re-write the social contract for American workers through multiple programs and initiatives. In 1935, Senator Robert Wagner (D-NY) spearheaded passage of the National Labor Relations Act that guaranteed workers the right to organize. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins was the architect of major legislation, including the Social Security Act that created unemployment insurance and old-age pensions and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) that began to curb child labor. FLSA also established the minimum wage and the 40-hour work week.

A national program of public works projects rebuilt the nation's infrastructure and provided productive jobs for millions of the unemployed. These projects were completed by many New Deal "alphabet agencies," including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

"I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Acceptance Speech, Democratic National Convention, July 2, 1932.



V. RECOVERY AND RESETTLEMENT

The federal government learned that many thousands of families who traveled to agricultural areas in search of work found themselves living in dangerous, dirty roadside encampments. The Farm Security Administration developed dozens of “sanitary camps” that offered them dignified temporary shelter. FSA camps included laundry facilities, daycare, and healthy recreational activities.

FSA also built almost one hundred homestead and farm communities with permanent housing for displaced workers. These were in suburban and rural areas. Local resistance blocked racially integrated housing. So, the FSA developed several communities for African Americans, including Aberdeen Gardens. It housed families of men employed in the nearby shipyards of Newport News, Virginia.



Arthur Rothstein, *Farmer After Shopping Trip*. Skyline Farms, Alabama, 1937.

VI. POWER FOR THE PEOPLE

In 1935, only ten percent of rural households had electricity. President Roosevelt and congressional action financed expansion of the electric grid through the Rural Electrification Act (REA), bringing low-cost power to farms and ranches nationwide.

FDR also supported creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. The TVA built more than a dozen dams that provided affordable hydro-electric power to seven states under the slogan “Electricity for All.” The first city to purchase power from the TVA was Tupelo, Mississippi.

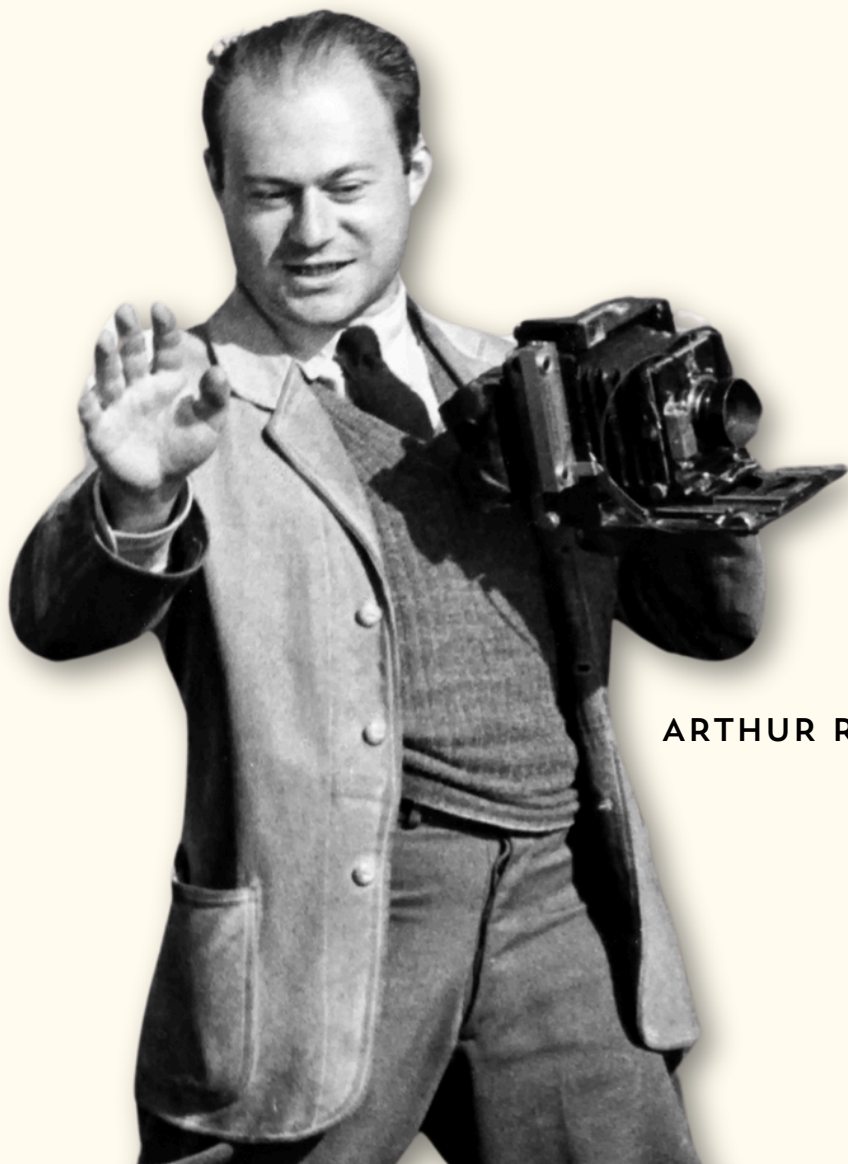
The TVA built the Douglas Dam in record time—just 385 days—to provide energy for America’s war production. Electricity from Douglas Dam powered the enormous Oak Ridge, Tennessee plant that enriched uranium for the first atomic bomb.



Arthur Rothstein, *Laying Track at TVA's Douglas Dam Site. Sevier County, Tennessee, 1942.*



Arthur Rothstein, *Farm Women at 4-H Fair Review Plans for REA Power Lines*. Marshalltown, Iowa, 1939.



ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN

Arthur Rothstein was born in New York City in 1915. After graduating from Columbia University in 1935, he joined the federal Farm Security Administration (FSA), one of the “New Deal” agencies created during the Great Depression by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Over the next seven years he made some of the most significant documentary photographs ever taken of rural and small-town America.



Rothstein became a staff photographer at *Look* magazine in 1940 but soon left to join the U.S. Office of War Information, and then served in the U.S. Army Signal Corp in Asia during World War II. In 1946 he served as Chief Photographer in China for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. After returning to New York City, he rejoined *Look* magazine where he worked as Director of Photography for 25 years until 1971 when the magazine ceased publication. Thereafter, he held the same post at *Parade* magazine until his death in 1985.

Arthur Rothstein was the author of numerous magazine articles and nine books on photography and photojournalism. He enjoyed teaching and mentoring younger photographers and was an innovator in photographic technology. His photographs are held in major museums and collections throughout the world.

Arthur Rothstein



BIOGRAPHICAL HIGHLIGHTS

1915

Born July 17, 1915

1935

B.A., Columbia College, NYC

1935-1940

Photographer, U.S. Farm Security Association

1940-1942

Photographer, *Look* Magazine

1941

Founder-member, American Society of Magazine Photographers

1942-1943

Photographer and Picture Editor, Office of War Information, Washington, D.C.

1943-1946

Photo Officer, U.S. Army Signal Corps, China, Burma, and India

1946

Chief Photographer, UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, China

1946-1971

Director of Photography, *Look* Magazine

1956

Solo show, International Museum of Photography, Eastman House, Rochester, NY

Published *Photojournalism* (NY: American Photographic Book Company)

1961-1970

Adjunct faculty, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia Univ., New York, NY

1963

Solo show, Smithsonian Institution, Washington

Published *Creative Color in Photography* (Philadelphia: Clifton Books)

1964

Pioneered three-dimensional photography; made first 3-D photo to be mass-produced

1967

Published, with William Saroyan, *Look at Us....* (NY: Cowles Education Corp.)

1970

Published *Color Photography Now* (NY: American Photographic Book Co.)

1971-1972

Editor, *Infinity* Magazine

1972-1985

Associate editor, director of photography and consultant, *Parade* Magazine

1978

Published *The Depression Years* (NY: Dover Publications)

1979

Published *Arthur Rothstein: Words and Pictures* (NY: Amphoto/Billboard)

1981

Published *American West in the Thirties* (NY: Dover Publications)

1984

Published *Arthur Rothstein's America in Photographs, 1930-1980* (NY: Dover Publications)

1985

Lifetime Arts Achievement award, New York Council of the Arts

Died November 11, 1985 in New Rochelle, NY

1986

Documentary Photography (Boston: Focal Press) published posthumously

1994

Retrospective show, Arthur Rothstein: Documentary Classics, International Center of Photography, New York, NY (September)

Manager of the FSA Photographic Division Roy Stryker (far right) reviewing photographs with the FSA photographers John Vachon, Arthur Rothstein, and Russell Lee. Photo by Beaumont Newhall (1908-1933).





A selection of Arthur Rothstein's press passes collected over a long and distinguished career.



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS
BY ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Heavy Black Clouds of Dust Rising over the Texas Panhandle.
Near Amarillo, Texas, 1936.

Bank that Failed. Kansas, 1936.

Bleached Skull of a Steer on the Dry Sun-baked Earth. South Dakota Badlands, 1936.

Empty Barns and Idle Trucks are Found throughout the Drought Area. Beach, North Dakota, 1936.

Sand Piled up in Front of Outhouse on Farm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936.

Swollen Mountain Streams Threatening Valley Homes. West Virginia, 1936.

Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936.

AMERICA'S REFUGEES

Vernon Evans from Lemmon, South Dakota on Highway 10. Near Missoula, Montana, 1936.

A Modern Covered Wagon with Family Going West for Work. Pennington County, South Dakota, 1936

Children of Submarginal Farmer. Oneida County, Idaho, 1936.

Family on Relief Living in Shanty on City Dump. Herrin, Illinois, 1939.

Forced to Leave by Drought. Near Beach, North Dakota, 1936.

State Highway Officials Moving Evicted Sharecroppers Away from Roadside. New Madrid County, Missouri, 1939.

Tenant Farmer Moving his Household Goods to a New Farm. Hamilton County, Tennessee, 1937.

DETERMINED TO STAY

Going to Church to Pray for Rain.
Grassy Butte, North Dakota, 1936.

Artelia Bendolph, Girl at Gee's Bend.
Boykin, Alabama, 1937.

Bootblack. Corner of 14th St & 8th
Ave. New York, 1937.

*FDR Visits Farmer Receiving Drought
Relief.* Mandan, North Dakota, 1936.

*Waiting for Their Grants in
Resettlement Administration Office.*
Drought area, North Dakota, 1936.

*J. Huffman Waiting for Better Times
in Front of His Closed Store.* Grassy
Butte, North Dakota, 1936.

A NEW DEAL FOR WORKERS

*Girl Picker at Cranberry Bog where
Three-fourths of Pickers are
Children.* Burlington County, New
Jersey, 1938.

Construction on a Stock Water Dam.
Dawes County, Nebraska, 1936.

*Daughter of Sharecropper in
Window.* Wilmington, North Carolina,
1935.

Demonstration of the Unemployed.
Columbus, Kansas, 1936.

*Plantation Owner's Daughter Checks
Weight of Cotton.* Kaufman County,
Texas, 1936.

Wives of Farmer Laborites.
Columbus, Kansas, 1936.

RECOVERY AND RESETTLEMENT

*Baseball Game at FSA Tulare
Migrant Labor Camp.* Visalia,
California, 1940.

One-room Schoolhouse.
Skyline Farms, Alabama, 1937.

Farmer after Shopping Trip.
Skyline Farms, Alabama, 1937.

*New Homes in the Aberdeen
Gardens FSA community.*
Newport News, Virginia, 1937.

*Community Traffic Officer at FSA
Migrant Labor Camp.* Weslaco,
Texas, 1942.

*Drake Family Playing for Saturday
Night Dance at FSA camp.* Weslaco,
Texas, 1942.

POWER FOR THE PEOPLE

*Some of the 1,300 Men on the Day
Shift.* TVA's Fort Loudoun Dam,
Tennessee, 1942.

Control Room of TVA's Watts Bar Dam.
Near Spring City, Tennessee, 1942.

Drillers at TVA's Fort Loudoun Dam.
Tennessee, 1942.

*Farm Women at 4-H Fair Review Plans
for REA Power Lines.* Marshalltown,
Iowa, 1939.

*Saturday Afternoon in a Prosperous
TVA town.* Florence, Alabama, 1942.

*Laying Track at TVA's Douglas Dam
Site.* Sevier County, Tennessee, 1942.

*Project Manager and Construction
Superintendent.* TVA's Douglas Dam,
Sevier County, Tennessee, 1942.

*TVA Powerhouse in "The First TVA
City."* Tupelo, Mississippi, 1935.

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