

# San Francisco Streets

In 1933 Lange began to capture the devastation of the Great Depression as it appeared on the streets of San Francisco. Willard Van Dyke, a photographer and early supporter of her work, wrote in *Camera Craft* magazine, “These people are in the midst of great changes—contemporary problems are reflected on their faces, a tremendous drama is unfolding before them, and Dorothea Lange is photographing it through them.”

The article appeared after an exhibition of Lange’s photographs was held in Van Dyke’s Oakland studio in 1934, through which Lange’s future collaborator and husband, Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist, learned of her work. Taylor used Lange’s photographs of the 1934 May Day demonstrations in San Francisco to accompany an article in *Survey Graphic*. These two publications launched Lange’s images into circulation, amplified by words—Van Dyke’s reflecting on her photographic practice, Taylor’s elaborating the labor conditions of the time.

# Government Work

From 1935 to 1939, Lange worked with government agencies to draw the public's attention to the economic and environmental catastrophe of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl drought. In late 1934 she first accompanied the agricultural economist (and her future husband) Paul Taylor in the field, and by early 1935 she was hired by Taylor and the California State Emergency Relief Administration as a typist—a salary for a photographer had not yet been approved. Their reports paired Taylor's formal, typed briefs with Lange's photographs and handwritten captions, taken from interviews with the individuals they encountered.

Together the words and pictures made a strong case for government intervention on behalf of migrant workers and drought refugees. Lange's photographs were a critical part of the Resettlement Administration's (later the Farm Security Administration's) promotion of New Deal policies and were available to anyone free of charge. As a result they circulated, sometimes with wildly variable captions, in books, newspapers, and magazines, increasing the visibility of the lives of sharecroppers, displaced families, and migrants.



# Land of the Free

“*Land of the Free* is the opposite of a book of poems illustrated by photographs. It is a book of photographs illustrated by a poem,” wrote the poet Archibald MacLeish, author of the 1938 publication. MacLeish’s text runs alongside photographs by Lange and other Resettlement Administration photographers in what he called a “sound track.” Rather than presenting the voices of the people in the images, he reimagines the meaning of liberty through poetry.

His use of the first-person plural throughout the long poem projects his ideas onto the people in the photographs, raising questions about the ethics of representation—about who is and is not free in this collective “we”—and the risks of applying language to images. *Land of the Free* also prompts reflection on how poetry can produce photographic images in readers’ minds, just as photography can capture the poetic in the physical world.

See Tess Taylor’s poetry book *Last West* (on the table nearby) for a contemporary response to Lange’s photographs.

# An American Exodus

“This is neither a book of photographs nor an illustrated book, in the traditional sense. . . . Upon a tripod of photographs, captions, and text we rest themes evolved out of long observations in the field.” So begins *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), conceived by Lange in collaboration with her husband, agricultural economist Paul Taylor.

The texts are drawn from field notes, folk song lyrics, newspaper excerpts, sociological observations, and quotations from the sharecroppers, displaced people, and migrant workers Lange photographed. About the use of direct quotes, Lange and Taylor reflected, “Many whom we met in the field vaguely regarded conversation with us as an opportunity to tell what they are up against to their government and to their countrymen at large. So far as possible we have let them speak to you face to face.”



# Pictures of Words

One of Roy Stryker's strategies for coordinating his team of Farm Security Administration photographers was to give them what he called "shooting scripts." These often took the form of lists of keywords, organized by topic, which he hoped would direct their attention to signs of the times, sometimes quite literally: one script called for "Signs—any sign that suggests rubber (or other commodity) shortage, rationing, etc."

The commodity shortages of the time are often evident in the materials from which the signs are constructed. The tone of their messages is variously penalizing, humorous, or righteous—registering the voices of the government, the landlord, the store owner, the union, the corporation, and the individuals who might be at their mercy. Lange's photographs wryly capture found words of all types—commercial and personal, hand printed and manufactured, ephemeral and durable—while at the same time recording their affective, social, and political texture.

# World War II

During World War II, Lange turned her attention to the impact of the war on Americans. Some of her most affecting images are of the Japanese Americans sent to internment camps in 1942 after Executive Order 9066 designated areas from which they could be excluded and subsequent orders authorized their imprisonment. Lange had been hired to document the policy's execution, but the photographs were initially withheld from circulation. For many people, her images bear the mark less of government-sanctioned documentation than of her visceral response to the orders and the prejudice they engendered.

Lange's photographs also registered the changing face of California, where port cities were becoming the front lines of labor in the country's war effort. In 1944 *Fortune* magazine hired Lange and Ansel Adams to photograph Richmond, California, a shipyard boomtown where the overcrowding of schools and depletion of available housing brought out racial tensions and discrimination. The assignment was to document the economic story, but Lange's photographs go beyond that brief to convey the human dimension of wartime upheaval.



# Life

During its golden age, *Life* shaped the photo-essay into the form as we know it today. Lange published just two stories in the magazine: “Three Mormon Towns,” with the photographer Ansel Adams and her son Daniel Dixon in 1954, and “Irish Country People,” in 1955. Both demonstrate her interest in agrarian communities and the rituals of rural life, especially in contrast with the changes brought by World War II in urban areas.

The first story profiled the distinct cultures of three towns in Utah; the second, the people of Ennis, in County Clare, Ireland, where she spent a month and shot some 2,400 photographs. The magazine’s uncompromising editorial hand frequently frustrated photographers. For “Three Mormon Towns,” Lange laboriously laid out a selection of 135 prints from the one thousand negatives she and Adams had made, but *Life* published just thirty-five of them. “The Mormon story turned out very sour indeed,” Adams wrote to Lange, “a very inadequate presentation which did no good to the Mormons, to photography, and to either of us.”

# 12 Million Black Voices

Seven of Lange's photographs are included in *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941), which brings together Richard Wright's words with Farm Security Administration photographs to tell a story of black life in the United States. Wright's text draws on his own life as a black man speaking for a multitude of which he is a part, and varies from the essayistic to the poetic.

In the book's four chapters—"Our Strange Birth," "Inheritors of Slavery," "Death on the City Pavements," and "Men in the Making"—he moves the reader through history: from slavery through segregation in the Jim Crow South and the Great Migration, which took African Americans to the industrial North. Wright contemplates the oppression and resilience of African Americans and looks toward the future: "We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is. If we black folk perish, America will perish."



# The Family of Man

*The Family of Man*, an exhibition organized in 1955 by MoMA curator Edward Steichen, is well known for its affirmation of humanist ideals across cultures, represented by more than five hundred images from sixty-eight countries. Words played a central role in the conception and design of the show, which was interspersed with quotations from literature, proverbs, and folk songs. Lange's ongoing conversations with Steichen about the ways in which words and images support each other helped shape the show's structure, with sections aligned to keywords—"birth," "lovers," "work," and "government/voting"—many of which she had suggested.

Its universalist ideals of relation and dignity, along with its pro-United Nations stance, dovetailed with the political ideology the United States Information Agency hoped to promote around the world during the early years of the Cold War. In 1955, the agency coordinated with the Museum to send five versions of the exhibition to countries across six continents, so that over the course of its tour, *The Family of Man* was seen by more than nine million people.

# Migrant Mother/ Popular Photography

Lange's most iconic photograph—of a woman and her daughters in Nipomo, California—was nearly twenty-five years old before her own words accompanied it in print. In 1960, in an article for *Popular Photography*, she recalled the day in March 1936 when she took it: “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.”

The image has circulated widely and in many forms; captions have changed, contexts have shifted, and surrounding stories have proliferated. The identity of the mother remained a mystery to the general public until 1978, when it was revealed that her name was Florence Owens Thompson and that she was of Cherokee descent, leaving us to consider the ways in which acknowledging her race might have produced a different sort of reception, altering the image's effectiveness as New Deal propaganda and, perhaps, its iconic status.



# Public Defender

From 1955 to 1957 Lange worked on a photo-essay following the day-to-day work of Martin Pulich, a public defender in Alameda County, California. The public defender program was established in California in 1915, and a federal version eventually followed. Lange's notes and research files for this project highlight the public defender's essential role in the pursuit of justice. The subject was a significant one for Lange, as she had recently financially supported her brother in his legal troubles, and she was keenly aware that many people could not afford attorneys.

*Life* considered but never ran the story; the photographs were later gathered in *Minimizing Racism in Jury Trials: The Voir Dire Conducted by Charles R. Garry in People of California v. Huey P. Newton*, a handbook published by the National Lawyers Guild in 1969, after the Black Panther Party cofounder's first trial. Although Lange did not consider herself an activist, in this context the photographs were deployed to tell a sociopolitical story of state-sanctioned racism, which appears to weigh heavily on the people involved.

# Late Work

Despite bouts of ill health, Lange continued to work through the late 1950s and early '60s, most often photographing her family and her travels abroad with her husband, Paul Taylor. In "Death of a Valley," she collaborated with the photographer Pirkle Jones on what would be her last major photo-essay, about the evacuation and flooding of Berryessa Valley, California, to build Monticello Dam. Lange's prescient attention to ecological change and rural development—here, to the ways in which "the development, distribution, and control of water has become California's biggest problem"—continued until her death, in October 1965.

In her final months she worked with John Szarkowski, the director of the photography department at MoMA, on what would be the definitive retrospective of her work, which opened in January 1966. Their correspondence demonstrates Lange's careful thinking about the "textual material" that surrounds her pictures: "I must read all my travel notes and go through my accumulations, to extract from them the Captions," many of which, she wrote, would "extend, buttress, illuminate, and explain the photograph."