

# **The bitter years: 1935-1941**

**Rural America as seen by the photographers of the  
Farm Security Administration. Edited by Edward  
Steichen**

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# THE BITTER YEARS

1935-1941



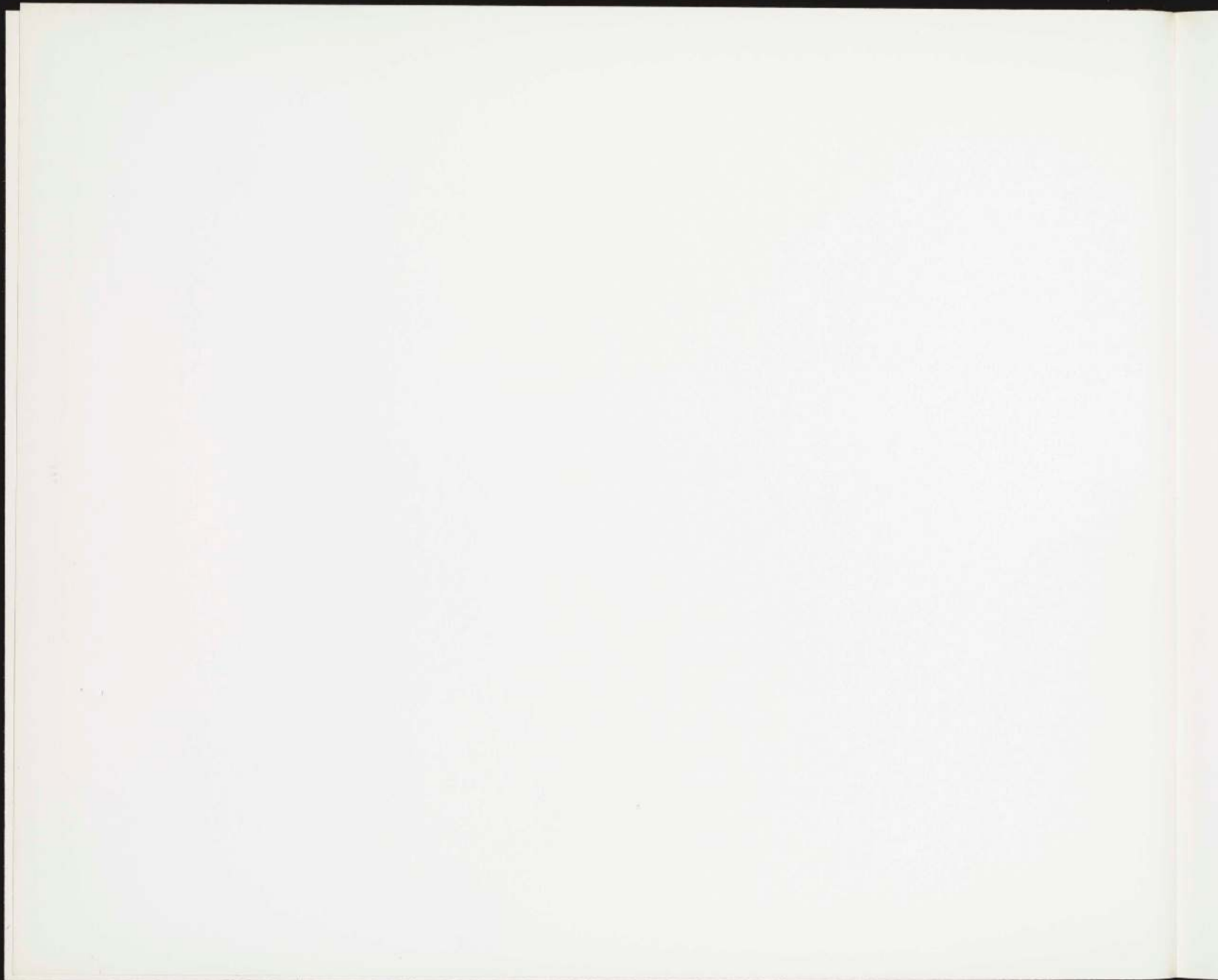
Rural America as seen by the  
photographers of the Farm  
Security Administration

*Edited by Edward Steichen*

The Museum of Modern Art  
New York







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TO SALUTE one of the proudest achievements in the history of photography, this book and the exhibition on which it is based are dedicated by Edward Steichen to

ROY E. STRYKER

who organized and directed the Photographic Unit of the Farm Security Administration and to his photographers: Paul Carter, John Collier, Jr., Jack Delano, Walker Evans, Theo Jung, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott.

I BELIEVE it is good at this time to be reminded of those "Bitter Years" and to bring them into the consciousness of a new generation which has problems of its own, but is largely unaware of the endurance and fortitude that made the emergence from the Great Depression one of America's victorious hours. It is also my hope that the exhibition of an incisive fragment of a vast undertaking may lead the Federal Government to establish and sponsor a permanent photographic organization for the continuing record of every phase and activity of the United States and its people. This idea might be in line with that of The National Council on the Arts and Government, which has included photography in its list of the arts.

The Museum gratefully acknowledges its indebtedness to Dr. Edgar Breitenbach of The Library of Congress, Miss Romana Javitz of The New York Public Library, and their staffs, as well as to Kathleen Haven, Designer of the Exhibition; Davis Pratt, Picture Research Assistant; and to the following members of the Department of Photography: John Szarkowski, Director; Grace M. Mayer, Curator; Rolf P. Petersen, Photographer, and Patricia M. Walker, Secretary.

*Edward Steichen*  
Director of the Exhibition

IT WAS CLEAR to those of us who had responsibility for the relief of distress among farmers during the Great Depression and during the following years of drought, that we were passing through an experience of American life that was unique.

At least we hoped it would be unique; and we intended not only to bring the resources of government to the assistance of those who were distressed or starved out but to make certain that never again should Americans be exposed to such cruelties.

It seemed important to record the incredible events of those years; and the best way was to photograph them. Roy Stryker was asked to organize the work and the superb job he and his collaborators did speaks for itself. It is not only a technical triumph but a record of neglect and a warning.

It can never happen again to so many in the same ways—partly because we have these reminders of what happened when we turned our backs on fellow citizens and allowed them to be ravaged.

*Rexford Guy Tugwell*



*"I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished."*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 20, 1937.

TWO YEARS EARLIER, to alleviate the plight of America's farm population, the President had created the Resettlement Administration within the Department of Agriculture, and appointed Rexford Guy Tugwell (then Under Secretary of Agriculture) as its administrator. Tugwell's advocacy of the dissemination of information by visual means led him to designate Roy E. Stryker, his long time colleague on the Economics Faculty of Columbia University, as head of the newly created Historical Section (the Photographic Unit) of the Division of Information of the Resettlement Administration, which in 1937 became the Farm Security Administration. The two scholars (along with Thomas Munro) had collaborated on a copiously illustrated textbook, *American Economic Life and the Means of its Improvement* (1925), for which Stryker had done the extensive picture research.

Stryker was ideally qualified for his pioneering assignment by way of temperament, editorial experience with photographs as sociological implements, and deeply sympathetic knowledge and understanding of the complexities of rural America. Though not himself a photographer, he possessed the intricate skills required to direct the men and women who were

to make in the neighborhood of 270,000 photographs of the land and the villages and the towns and the cities and the people in the eight years before the program became part of the Office of War Information. He expressed his rationale in "The Complete Photographer," edited by Willard D. Morgan (No. 21, April 10, 1942): "... The documentary photographer does not take snapshots. . . . He speaks a language. . . . 'Documentary' is an approach, not a technic; an affirmation, not a negation. . . . In photography, as in the other arts, the documentary attitude is not a denial of the plastic elements which must remain essential criteria in any work. It merely gives these elements limitation and direction. Thus composition becomes emphasis, and the line sharpness, focus, filtering, mood—all those components included in the dreamy vagueness 'quality'—are made to serve an end: to speak, as eloquently as possible, of the thing to be said in the language of pictures. . . . The question is not what to picture nor what camera to use. Every phase of our time and our surroundings has vital significance and any camera in good repair is an adequate instrument. The job is to know enough about the subject matter, to find its significance in itself and in relation to

its surroundings, its time and its function." He soon became aware of the cumulative impact of the photographic essay over the single picture, and gave the guidance of non-intervention to his young staff, many of whom are today commanding figures in the field of photography. For instance, two—Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, who joined the Section during the year of its inception—figure among the nineteen *Masters of Photography* selected by Beaumont and Nancy Newhall for their book of that title; Arthur Rothstein, the first comer, is Technical Director of Photography at *Look*, and John Vachon's name is also listed on its masthead; Carl Mydans has been a *Life* photographer since 1936, the date of the magazine's birth; Ben Shahn ranks as one of the major figures in American art; Russell Lee continues to make fine contribution to documentary photography and Jack Delano, who divides his time between music and photography, is now general manager of the radio and television service of the Department of Education of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. A quarter of a century ago, Roy Stryker sent his dedicated photographers throughout the country (not as a constant team, for the complement was naturally subject to many changes) carefully briefed and intellectually equipped and prepared to make multiple dimensioned studies of the situations that would confront them. Far from being intruders on the pathetic privacy of their subjects, the photographers became the understanding friends and

interpreters of the migrants, the sharecroppers, the unemployed, the dispossessed, and brought back the philosophy and reactions—as well as the faces—of the people and their home places; the nature of the land, as well as its contours. They explored the need for conservation of human and natural resources, studied cause and effect. They produced some of the greatest documentary photographs ever made, interpretations that avoided the pictorial, the sensational, the sentimental, but spoke with feeling in the idiom of truth. Nor was all the work downbeat, for there were even moments of gaiety in such essays as Russell Lee's "Pie Town." Along with this camera record of despair, there was visual evidence of the courage that led to emergence. The fact that these photographs have not become "dated" with the passage of two decades attests to their strength. The 270,000 negatives are preserved in The Library of Congress, to serve as record and purposeful reminder, while approximately 200,000 prints are on file in the Picture Collection of The New York Public Library.

In 1938, the impact of Stryker's three-year-old project was first brought before the American public as the most meaningful and controversial part of the First International Photographic Exposition, organized by Willard D. Morgan and others, and held at New York's Grand Central Palace. Close to five hundred visitors' comments—with rare exceptions sympathetic—were found in the suggestion box, among them such remarks

as "It's about time these conditions were eradicated—show more and people will understand more"; "The Awful Truth (Real Awful)"; "Why the hell isn't something done about it?"; "Wonderful Pictures, but? Am I My Brother's Keeper?"; "They show that photography with a purpose may not necessarily be lacking in art or interest." In a dramatic reprise of the F.S.A. Section of the exhibition, appearing for the record as the lead article in Tom Maloney's *U. S. Camera 1939 Annual*, Edward Steichen wrote: "Have a look into the faces of the men and women in these pages. Listen to the story they tell and they will leave with you a feeling of a living experience you won't forget; and the babies here, and the children; weird, hungry, dirty, lovable, heart-breaking images; and then there are the fierce stories of strong, gaunt men and women in time of flood and drought. . . . It is not the individual photographers that make these pictures so important, but it is the job as a whole as it has been produced by the photographers as a group that makes it such a unique and outstanding achievement."

The thinking behind the F.S.A. photographic project was the fountainhead for classics of the documentary film, shown by the Museum's Film Library during the course of the recent exhibition: the great Pare Lorentz epics, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), *The River* (1937) and *Fight for Life* (1940); Joris Ivens' *Power and the Land* (1940); *The Land* by Robert Flaherty (1941) and *The Home Place* (1941), directed

by Raymond Evans. The United States Film Service, proposed and headed by Pare Lorentz, was arbitrarily abolished in Congress in 1941. John Ford, working on the film version of Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (released in 1939), sought and found primary source material in Dorothea Lange's photographs.

Through the years, various exhibitions, critical evaluations and widespread reproduction of the F.S.A. photographs in magazines and newspapers familiarized America with the tragic circumstances, the marginal existence and the magnificent courage of some Americans half a century after Jacob A. Riis had demonstrated visually, as well as in his writings, *How the Other Half Lives*.

Major contributions to the new F.S.A. vocabulary in photography were such books as *Walker Evans: American Photographs* (1938) and Evans' collaborative masterpiece with James Agee—*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), both happily again in print. From the F.S.A. matrix came Archibald MacLeish's singing *Land of the Free* (1938); *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* by Herman Clarence Nixon (1938); Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town* (1940); *12 Million Black Voices* by Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam (1941), and *Tenants of the Almighty* by Arthur Raper (1943). Dorothea Lange and her husband Paul Schuster Taylor made beautiful use of her F.S.A. photographs in *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), a distillation of their studies on migrant labor. Dr.

Taylor, Professor of Economics at the University of California, has expressed a sociologist's involvement with "The Bitter Years" and their documentation by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration:

"If you who read these photographs see in them only massed human misery, and decry the selection of so much suffering, they have failed to show the multiform pattern of which it is a reflection. For the havoc before your eyes is the result of both natural and social forces. It is a consequence not only of recurring drought and protracted depression, but of such swift-moving and penetrating forces now operating on a rural society as those which during a century and three-quarters have reconstituted industrial society in the image of the machine.

"In their uneven but visible progress these forces left behind them a wake of tenant farmers cut from the land and stripped of their property, of sharecroppers made day laborers, of plantations denuded of families, of towns filled with refugees from farm and plantation, of dependence on relief for those who were independent on the soil, of families seeking refuge in flight half-way across the continent, of the formation of a white and black American rural proletariat.

"These mutations in our rural social structure and especially their human and social cost, are the theme of these photographs."

*Grace M. Mayer*

*Excerpts from Dorothea Lange's conversations with some of the people involved  
in the tragic events of "The Bitter Years."*

"We ain't no paupers. We hold ourselves to be decent folks. We don't want no relief. But what we do want is a chanst to make an honest living like what we was raised."

"A human being has a right to stand like a tree has a right to stand."

"All we got to start with is a family of kids."

*Son to father:* "You didn't know the world was so wide."

*Father to son:* "No, but I knew what I was goin' to have for breakfast."

"This is a hard life to swallow, but I just couldn't sit back there and look to someone to feed us."

"Yessir, we're starved, stalled and stranded."

"We got enough troubles without going Communist."

"I wouldn't have relief no way it was fixed."

"I've wrote back that we're well and such as that, but I never have wrote that we live in a tent."

"When you gits down to your last bean, your backbone and your navel shakes dice to see which gits it."

"Brother, hit's pick seventy-five cent cotton or starve."

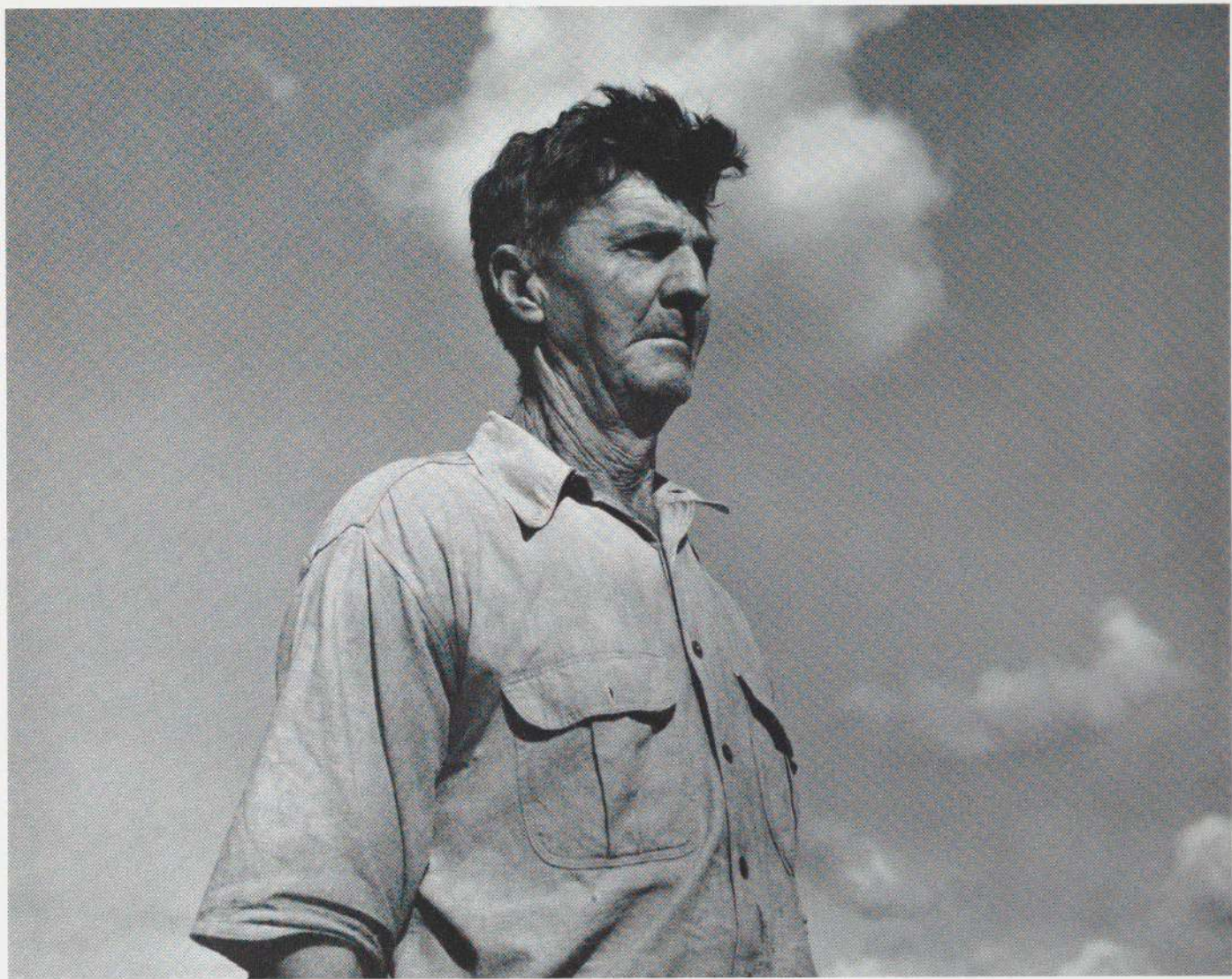
"I come from Texas and don't owe or own a thin dime back there."

"If I could get me a piece of land I'd go to diggin' it with my hands."

"A piece of meat in the house would like to scare these children of mine to death."

"Us people has got to stick together to get by these hard times."

"We just make enough for beans, and when we have to buy gas it comes out of the beans."



Dorothea Lange

*Texas farmer to migratory worker in California*



Dorothea Lange

*Ex-slave*



Dorothea Lange

*Hoe culture*





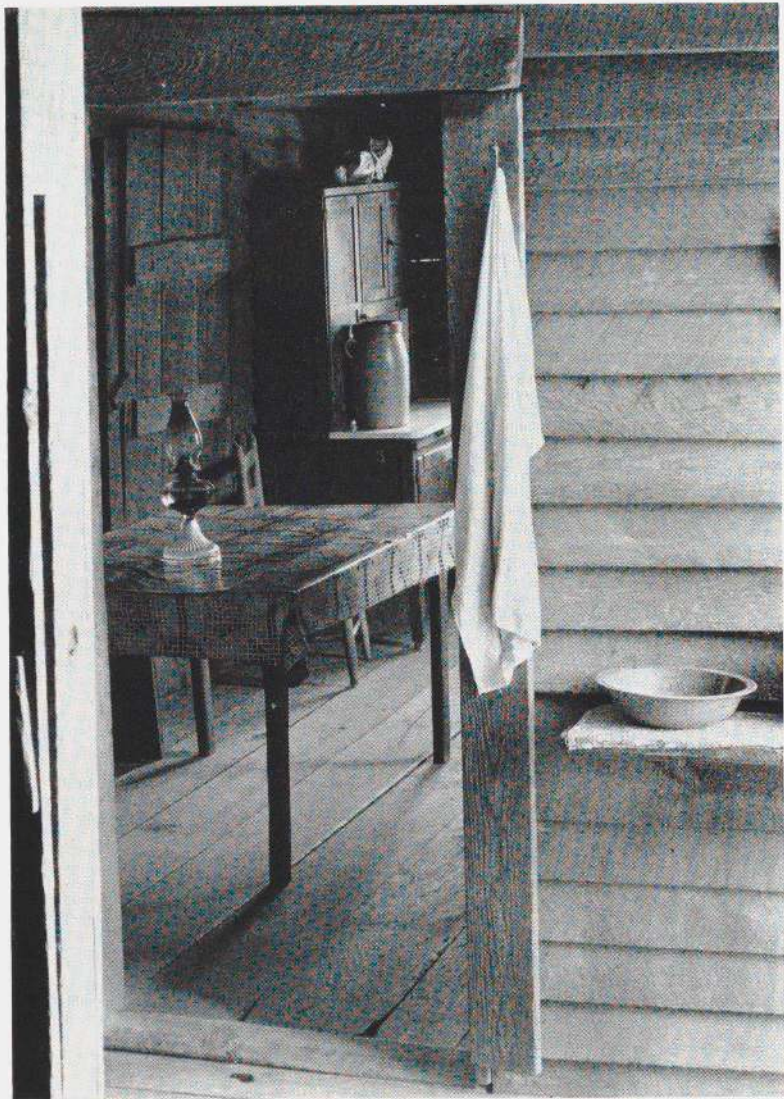
Ben Shahn

*Cotton pickers*



Dorothea Lange

*Tracted out*



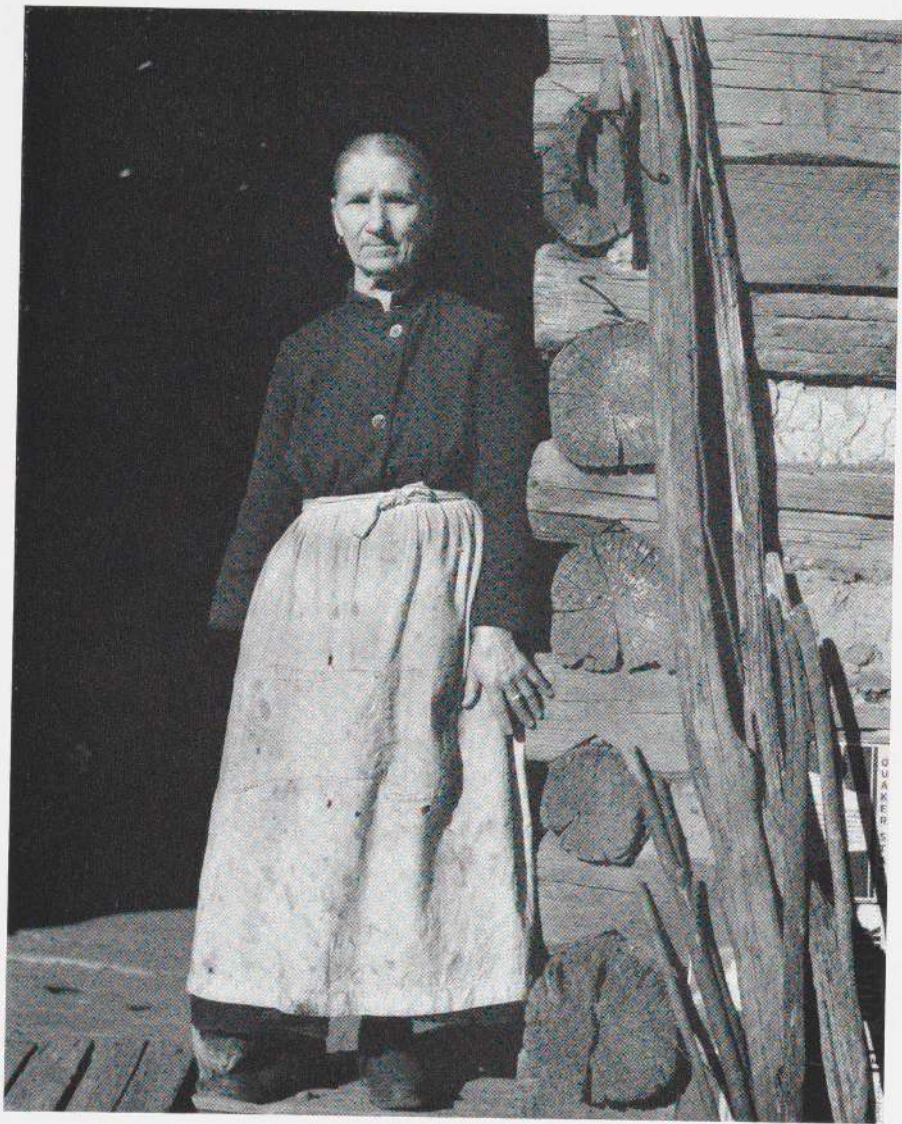
Walker Evans

*Interior—tenant farm*



John Vachon

*Minnesota farmers*



Arthur Rothstein

*Pioneer woman*



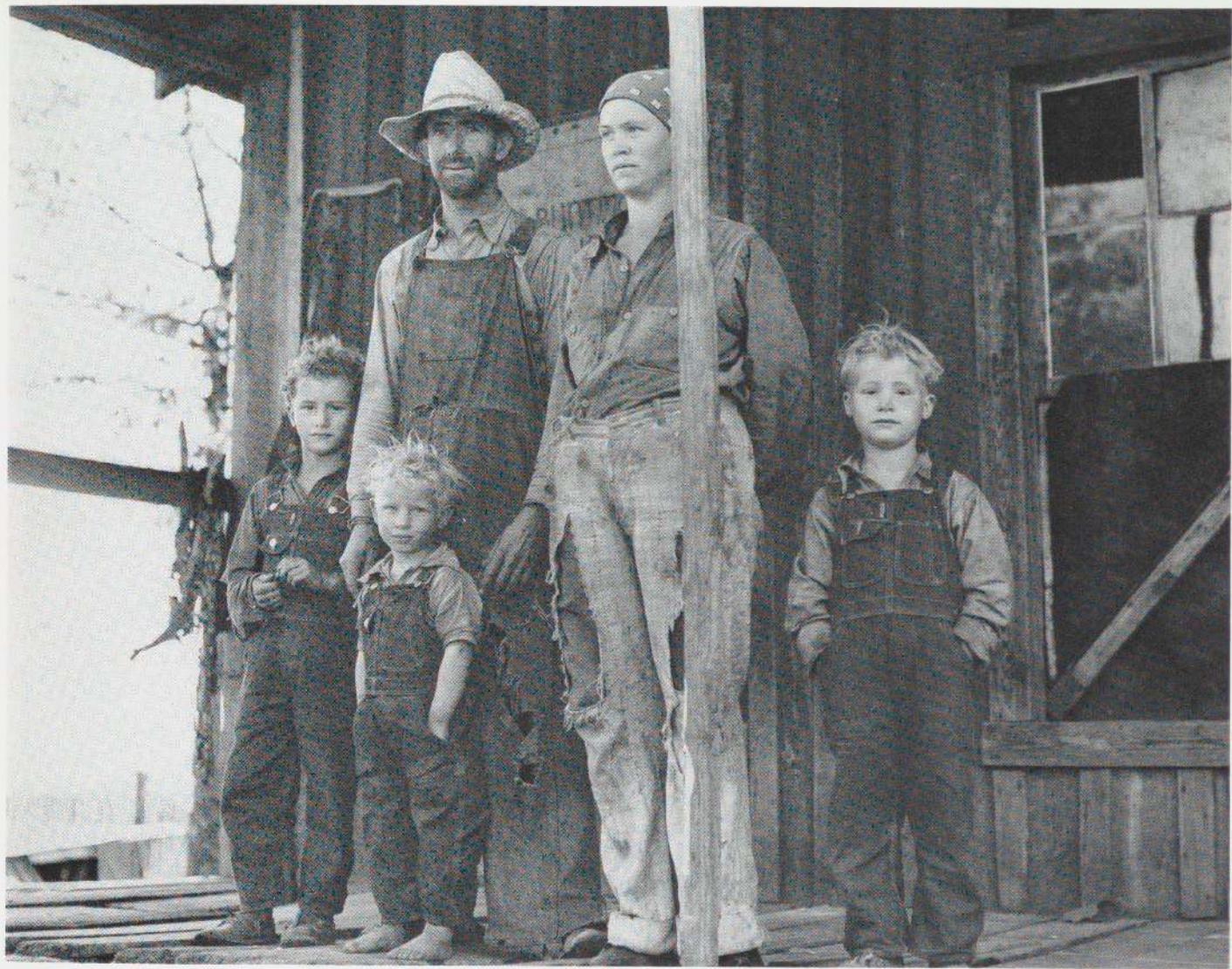
Jack Delano

*New England farmers*



Walker Evans

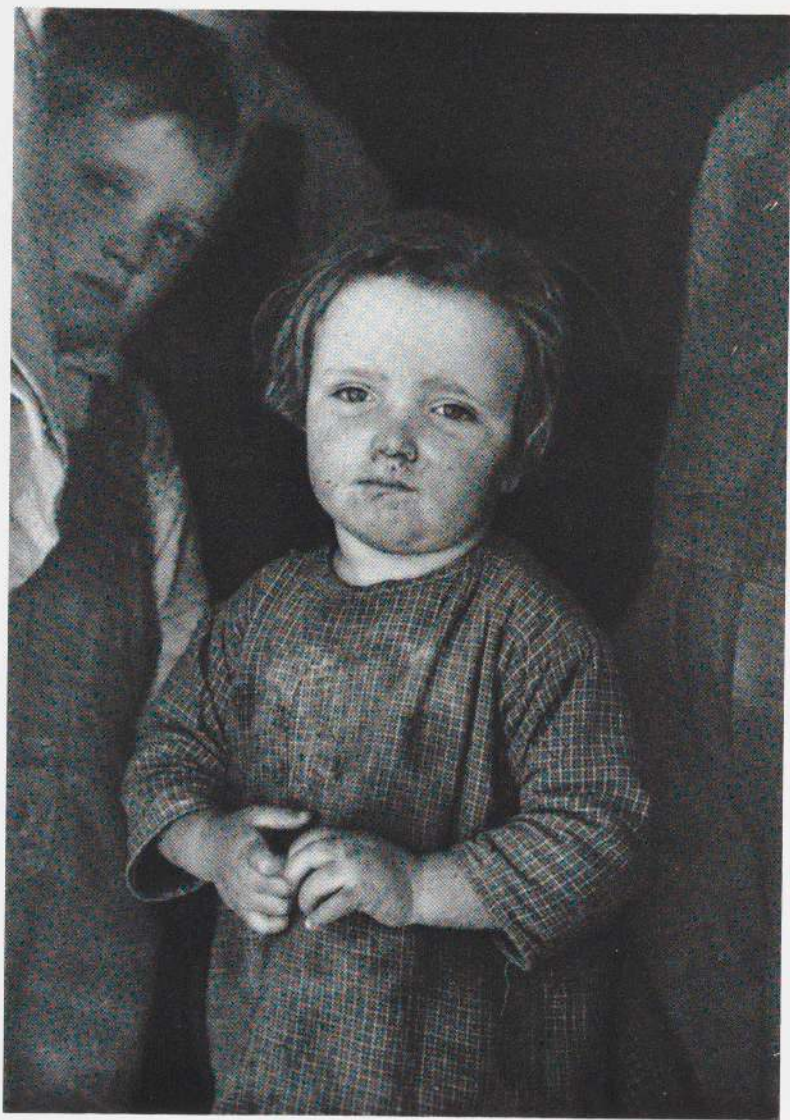
*Sharecropper's family*



John Vachon

*Ozark mountain family*





Carl Mydans

*Farm children*



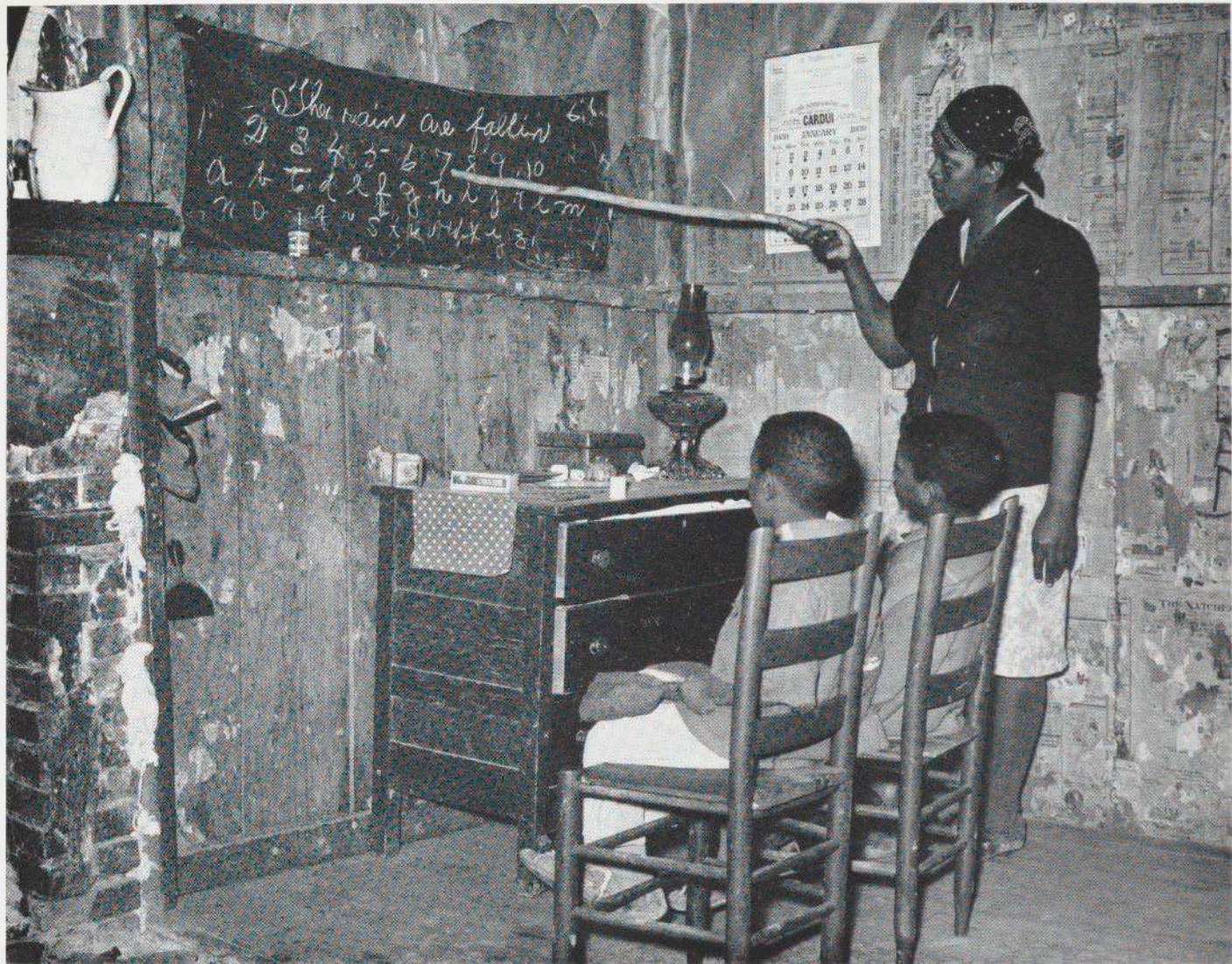
Russell Lee

*Old age*



Russell Lee

*A Christmas dinner*



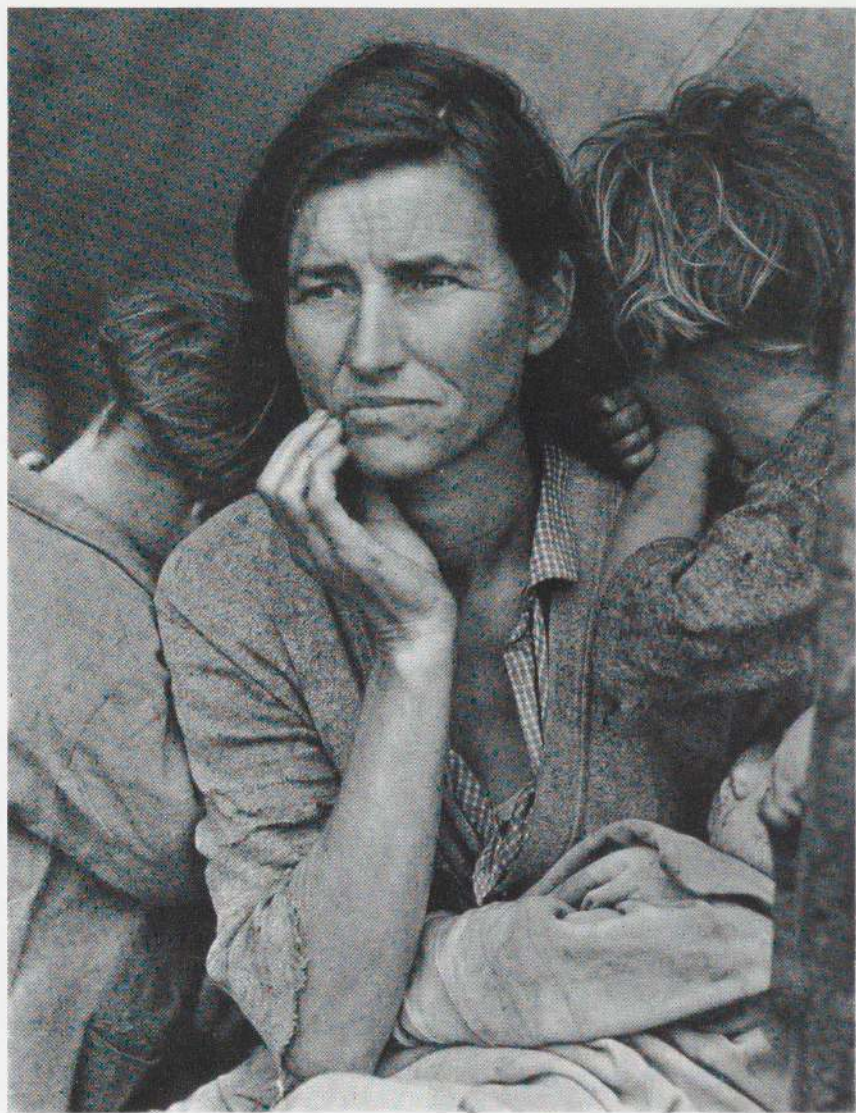
Russell Lee

*School at home*



Arthur Rothstein

*Dust storm*



Dorothea Lange

*Migrant mother*



Carl Mydans

*"... ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished."*



Marion Post Wolcott

*Ninety-one years old*





Dorothea Lange

*Exodus*



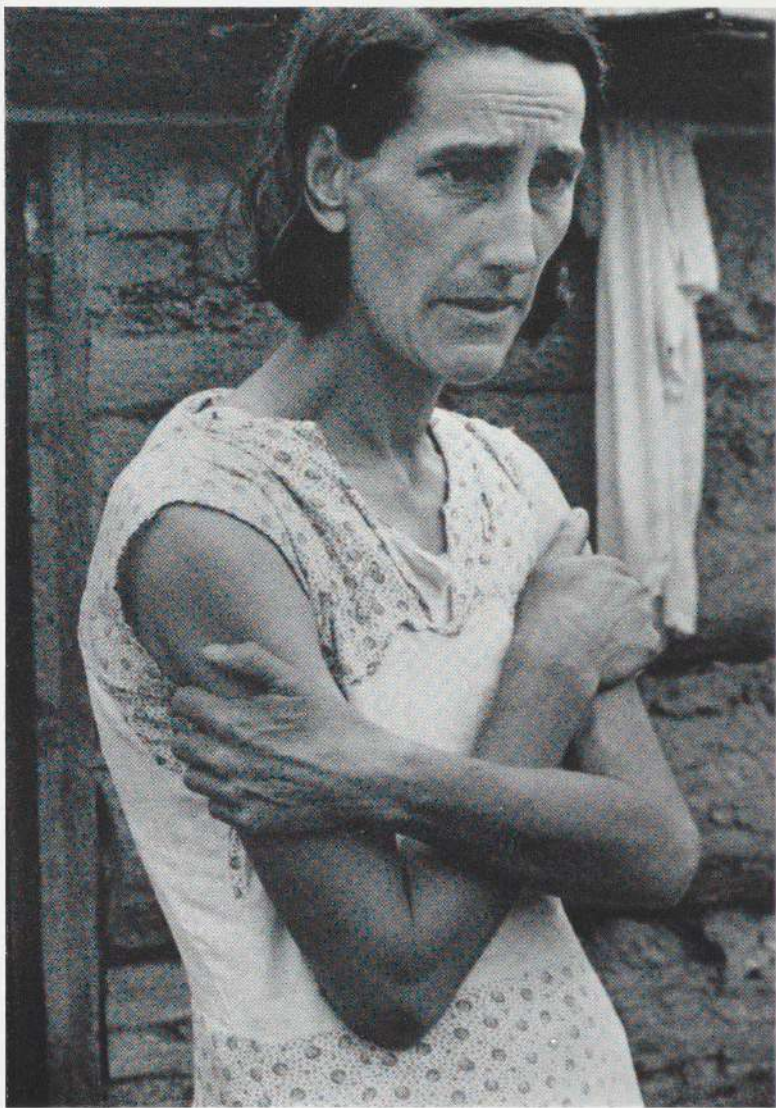
Dorothea Lange

*Desperation*



Jack Delano

*Children—South Carolina*



Ben Shahn

*Destitute*



Dorothea Lange

*Jobless*



Walker Evans

*Sharecropper's daughter*

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