

# IVAN DOUGHERTY GALLERY

APRIL 27th - MAY 16th 1987

## THE AMERICAN FARM SECURITY PHOTOGRAPHS

In 1935, a quarter of the American population, 33 million people, lived on farms. Rural America was burdened not only by the Depression and the resulting collapse in agricultural markets, but by the most ruinous drought and dust storms in U.S. history. To help alleviate the rural crisis, President Roosevelt's Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Rexford Tugwell, implemented an expensive and controversial program of low-interest loans and direct subsidies to farmers. In order to persuade Congress and the urban American population of the desperate plight of many farmers, Tugwell engaged an agricultural economist, Roy Stryker, to head a photographic unit which would provide visual evidence that government assistance was both necessary and effective.

Over the next few years Stryker recruited an extraordinary group of photographers, with considerable differences in temperament, technical skill, and approach to picture-making, and he attempted, with varying degrees of success, to shape them into a cohesive group, committed to supplying the government with the steady stream of photographs which would convince urban America of the efficacy of Roosevelt's New Deal. Thirties America was hungry for such 'human documents', designed to inform the emotions rather than the intellect, and the FSA photographs, distributed free of charge to thousands of newspapers and magazines, were received enthusiastically.

Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother is probably the most familiar photograph in the exhibition. In Lange's own words: "... I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children 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. The pea crop at Nipomo had frozen and there was no work for anybody. But I did not approach the tents and shelters of other stranded pea-pickers. It was not necessary; I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment ..."

The FSA file eventually comprised over 270,000 pictures which were turned over to the Office of War Information when the FSA was disbanded. The work is now lodged in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. Almost all the material is in the public domain and anyone may obtain high quality copies from the Photoduplication Service of the Library of Congress in Washington for a reasonable fee.