

Curriculum Materials: The Great Depression & Farm Security Administration Photography

Curriculum Summary	
Title	The Great Depression & Farm Security Administration Photography
Content Areas	History, Historical Event, Social Studies, Economics, photography, history of photography, politics, media
Subject	The Great Depression, The Dust Bowl, New Deal, Farm Security Administration, photography, propaganda
Grade Level/Age	9th, 10th, 11th
Resource Materials (Downloadable)	Images, text
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve visual literacy by analyzing photographs take during the Great Depression by the Farm Security Administration • Become familiar with the history surround FSA photographers and their work • Develop and understand of how photographs can be used to communicate information and influence opinion
Key Skills	Visual Literacy, analysis, discussion
Lesson Plan	Teachers can begin by showing students the provided photos and asking them what they see. Students can be asked to provide adjectives that they associate with the people and the settings depicted in the photos. Then, teachers can provide the context behind the photos and ask discussion questions of the students. Teachers can also ask students to use their camera phones (students can be divided into groups) to take a photo that can be used to bolster a chosen argument. Alternatively, if there aren't enough camera phones, students can make a collage instead out of magazine photographs. Students should be asked to think about why they made the creative choices that they did in this project, whether the photo they took represents reality, and whether it qualifies as propaganda.
Cross-Curricular Connections	Art, Photography, Social Studies, History, Economics
Essential Questions	Does photography depict reality? How can photography be used as propaganda? What makes something effective propaganda? How can photographers use the medium to get across their intended message?
Classroom Materials Needed for Lesson Plan	
Academic Vocabulary	New Deal, Propaganda

Summary:

During the Great Depression, photographers were sent out under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration, in order to take photographs that would drum up support for the program. One of the locations visited by photographers was rural New Mexico, and the photographs that were taken remain a unique snapshot of that era and those places. They additionally provide an interesting viewpoint on propaganda, and the way it can blend fiction with truth.

Content:

The Great Depression officially began in 1929 with an impact felt across the country; American farmers were particularly hard-hit. Because of the widespread economic hardship, the price of farmers' goods dropped dramatically, meaning that many struggled to afford their living expenses and maintain their businesses. A large portion of the country was also suffering from a long and severe drought accompanied by dust storms, known as the Dustbowl, which served to significantly worsen the economic difficulties of farmers. Even when the Great Depression officially ended in 1939, many rural farmers had not recovered from the economic impacts of the previous decade.

Agriculture's ailing economic condition had a particularly harsh effect on New Mexico because the state was primarily rural during the 1930's. Many New Mexicans were employed raising crops and livestock, meaning that the hardships faced by farmers were especially widespread.

Dry farmers, who didn't use irrigation for their crops and instead relied on the available moisture in the soil, were especially devastated as they suffered from both continually high operating costs and a prolonged drought that dried up portions of New Mexico so badly that they became part of the Dust Bowl. On May 28, 1937, one dust cloud, or "black roller," measuring fifteen hundred feet high and a mile across, descended upon the farming and ranching community of Clayton, New Mexico. The dust blew for hours and was so thick that electric lights could not be seen across the street. Everywhere they hit, dust storms killed livestock and destroyed crops. In the Estancia Valley entire crops of pinto beans were killed, transforming that once productive area into what author John L. Sinclair called "the valley of broken hearts." In 1931, the state's most important crops were only worth about half of their 1929 value. Many New Mexico farmers had few or no crops to sell and eventually were forced to sell their land. The result was that in all of New Mexico, farmland dropped in value until it bottomed out at an average of \$4.95 an acre, the lowest value per acre of land in the United States. The Depression also hurt New Mexico's cattle ranchers who suffered from both drought and a shrinking marketplace. As grasslands dried up, they raised fewer cattle; and as the demand for beef declined, so did the value of the cattle on New Mexico's rangelands. Like the farmers, many ranchers fell behind in their taxes and were forced to sell their land.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected US president in 1932, during the Great Depression. After becoming elected, he strove to enact federal relief and reform programs to end the Depression. The created under his administration became collectively known as the "New Deal." One of those programs was the Resettlement Administration, created in 1935 within the Department of Agriculture, which was replaced with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937. The purpose of this administration was to assist with relocation of rural farming communities to more prosperous areas, to address environmental issues facing farmers, and to finance loans for the purchase of more fertile farmland and equipment.

The overall goal was to alleviate the specific economic burdens placed on rural communities by the Great Depression. All in all, it was an expensive endeavor, and was subject to criticism from political opponents.

To demonstrate the need for this program to the American public, Roy Stryker, head of the FSA Photographic Unit, sent photographers out to rural areas, including parts of New Mexico, to collect photographs that would effectively sway public opinion towards supporting the program and its funding. The effort additionally functioned to give work to artists who struggled to find employment during the Great Depression. The use of photography was part of a larger movement at the time by the government to incorporate new media technologies into their interactions with the public.

Photographers were generally given free rein, although they were directed to certain areas and subjects. The idea was to document residents and rural conditions in a way that increased empathy in the public and convinced them of the need for government assistance. The photographers were also meant to photograph in a manner that emphasized realism and rejected artifice. Additionally, Roy Stryker exercised a great deal of control over which photos were released for widespread circulation, frequently rejecting photos that he believed would not be effective with the public, including many photos of nonwhite people. The captions were often edited from the photographer's original text and, in a few cases, presented a false narrative to the public as a result. For example, the caption on a photograph of a young girl holding her baby brother was changed to misidentify her as a "Tenant Madonna."

The project produced more than 270,000 photographs, some of which became iconic, such as "Migrant Mother" taken by Dorothea Lange. The photos were initially printed in government-published public resources but by 1937 photographs from the project were being printed in mainstream news sources such as *Life* magazine. The wide circulation of FSA commissioned photographs is credited with raising awareness of rural poverty. This project was also the first concerted effort by the U.S. government to use photography to further a political agenda. The FSA photos are now considered an important historical document of a significant era and are credited with having a lasting effect on the common understanding of rural life during the Great Depression.

Discussion Questions for Students:

1. What message do you think that the photographers were trying to convey with their photos? Were they successful? What creative choices deliver that message?
2. In an interview in 1963 Roy Stryker, the leader of the photography program, opined that photography was inferior to writing when it came to communicating, saying "I still think that the printed word, that the word is dominant thing, and the photograph is the little brother of words." Do you think this is true? In terms of the message that the FSA was trying to convey, was photography the most effective medium?

3. Are these photographs propaganda? Can something be propaganda if what it shows is something that really occurred? Does something need to be false to qualify as propaganda? How would you define propaganda?
4. Who is the intended audience for these photos? Do you think that the audience was considered when the photographs were being taken, and if so, how specifically might they have influenced the way the photographer chose to take the photo?
5. Considering that many of the photographers were outsiders in the communities that they photographed, how do you imagine that might influence the work they produced?

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Curriculum Artwork Credits:

Cordova, Rio Arriba County, NM, 1943 (printed 1990)

John Collier Jr. (American, 1913 - 1992)

gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm)

New Mexico Farm Security Administration Collection, Museum purchase with funds from the Pinewood Foundation with additional support from Barbara Erdman, 1990

1990.70.321

Sorting beans, Juan Lopez and son, Trampas, NM, 1943 (printed 1990)

John Collier Jr. (American, 1913 - 1992)

gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

New Mexico Farm Security Administration Collection, Museum purchase with funds from the Pinewood

Foundation with additional support from Barbara Erdman, 1990
1990.70.273

Stage which Daily Brings the Mail - Pie Town, NM, 1940 (printed 1990)

Russell Lee (American, 1903 - 1986)

gelatin silver print, 8 x 9 7/8 in. (20.3 x 25.1 cm)

New Mexico Farm Security Administration Collection, Museum purchase with funds from the Pinewood Foundation with additional support from Barbara Erdman, 1990

1990.70.155

Hobbs, NM, 1940 (printed 1990)

Russell Lee (American, 1903 - 1986)

gelatin silver print 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm)

New Mexico Farm Security Administration Collection, Museum purchase with funds from the Pinewood Foundation with additional support from Barbara Erdman, 1990

1990.70.130

On the Front Steps (Pie Town, NM), 1940 (printed 1990)

Russell Lee (American, 1903 - 1986)

gelatin silver print 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

New Mexico Farm Security Administration Collection, Museum purchase with funds from the Pinewood Foundation with additional support from Barbara Erdman, 1990

1990.70.77