

THE GREAT DEPRESSION had a tight grip on America by 1935. People all over the country were suffering in the worst economic downturn in history, which had put millions of people out of work. Farmers, in particular, had a difficult time. In addition to the tough economic circumstances, the *Dust Bowl* had made making a living off the land impossible in certain areas.

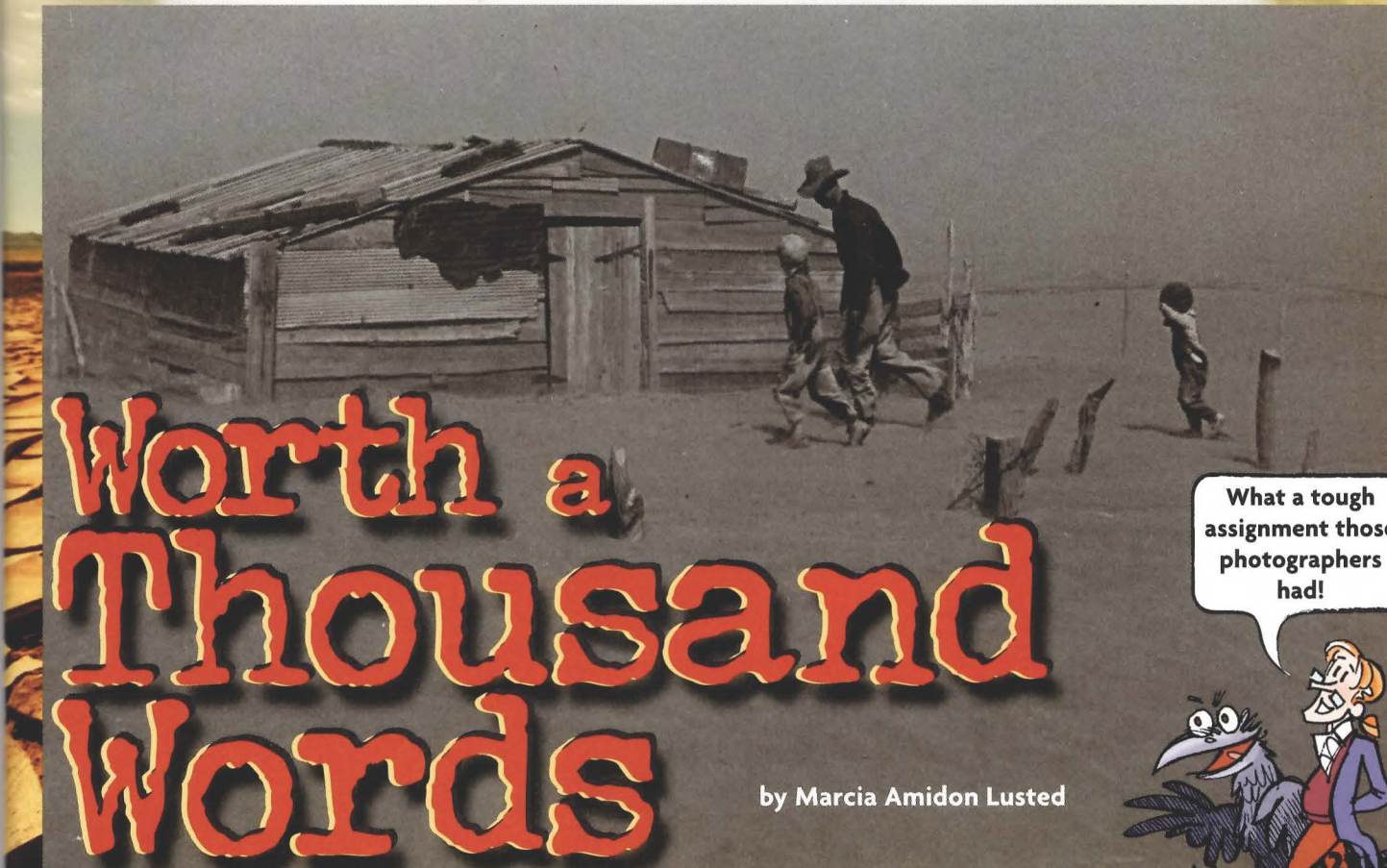
It was at this time that a man named Roy E. Stryker, working for the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), gathered together a group of approximately 20 photographers. Their mission was to visually document the impact of the times on the people of America, especially those living in impoverished rural areas.

Stryker selected and distributed the photographs taken by his staff to newspapers, magazines, and book publishers to generate public support for the New Deal programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Stryker believed that people's lives could be improved

through social reform and education, and he saw the New Deal programs as a way to achieve those benefits. In the end, about 250,000 black-and-white negatives were produced. About 77,000 of those negatives became photographic prints published through the FSA project, creating one of the most complete photographic historic records of a specific time and place in America.

Despite their focus on people living in extreme poverty and disorder, Stryker's photographers emphasized the dignity and courage of their subjects, even in times of great hardship. There are images of farms covered in dust, families headed west with all their belongings piled on a car, and migrant workers living in temporary camps. As a result of the FSA's photographic project, several photographers became famous because of the iconic images they created. To browse through the images, go to memory .loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html.

The *Dust Bowl* refers to the period of severe drought combined with poor agricultural practices that resulted in the topsoil of the Southern Plains being blown away in massive dust storms.

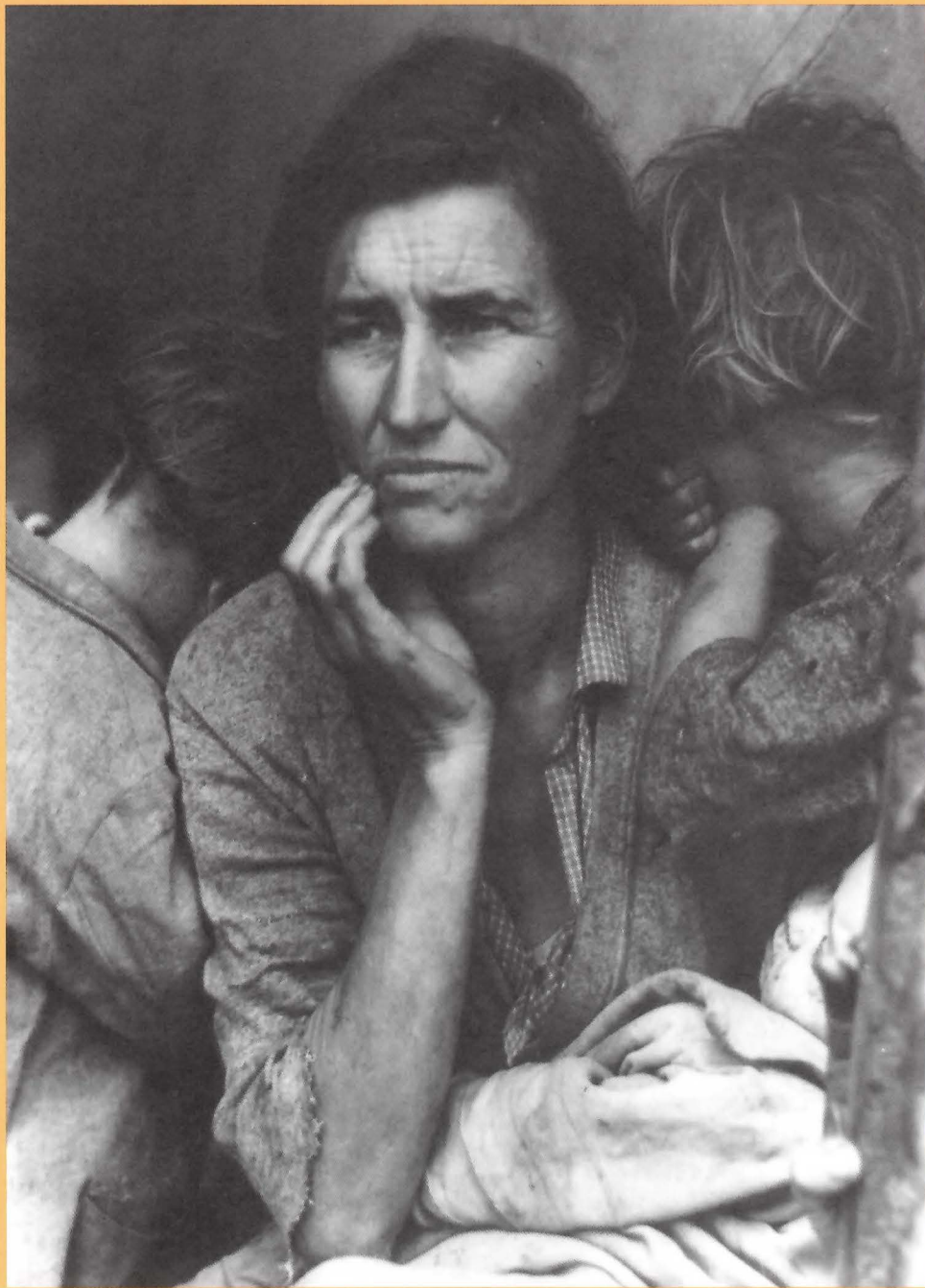


Worth a Thousand Words

by Marcia Amidon Lusted

What a tough assignment those photographers had!





Dorothea Lange took some of the most famous images of the Great Depression. She spent five years as an FSA photographer documenting rural poverty and the lives of sharecroppers. Lange's work heavily influenced the development of documentary photography. One of her photographs, taken in 1936 at a roadside migrant camp, has become the most famous and most poignant image of the Great Depression. Called *Migrant Mother*, it shows a woman, her face lined with worry, with her children clinging about her. Lange later took photos of Japanese internment camps during World War II (1939–1945). These pictures were so powerful that the U.S. Army refused to release them for many years.



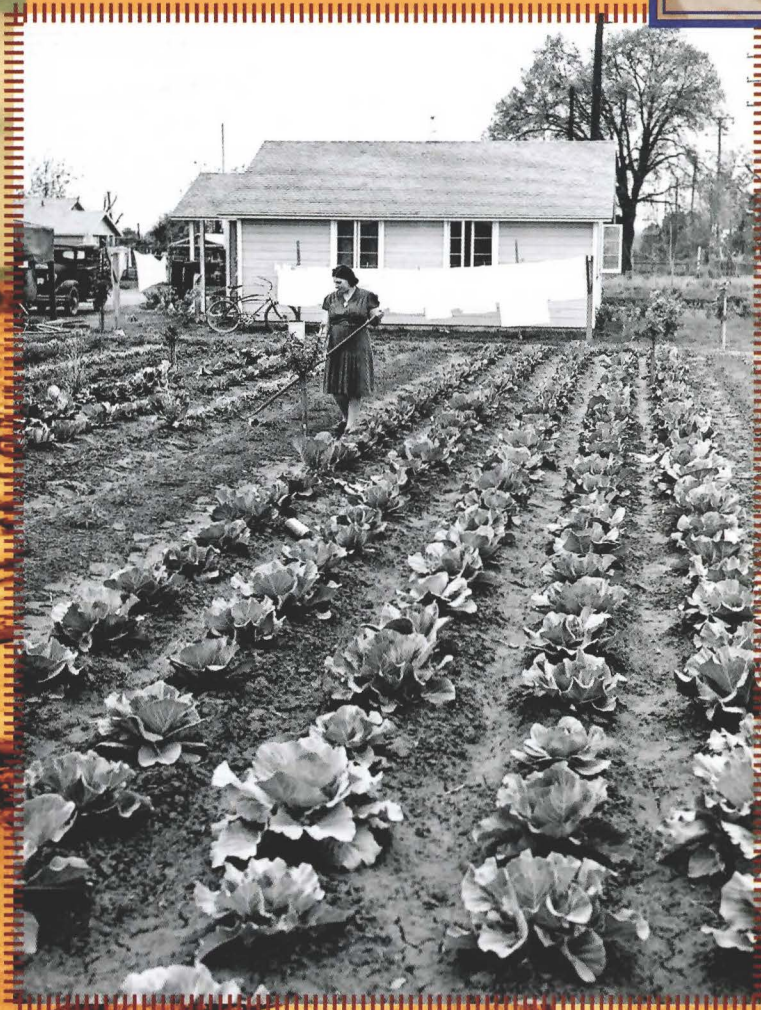
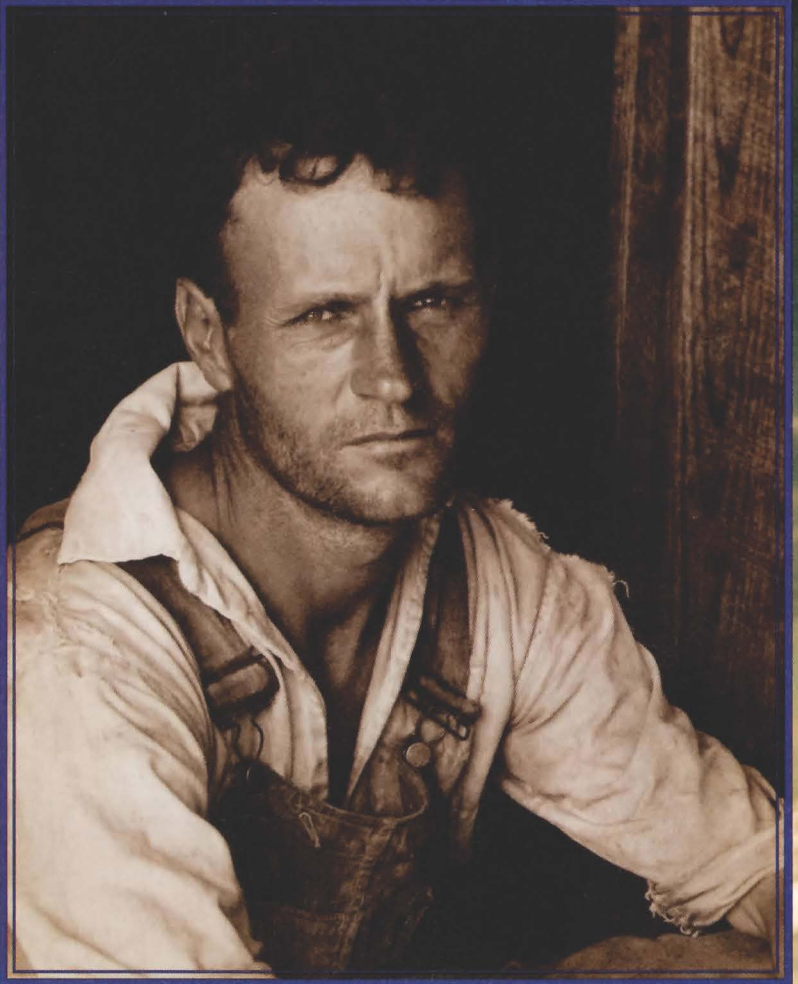
A less-detailed view (RIGHT) of the family shows how Lange's close-up photograph offers a more powerful and personal connection to the family's situation.

Gordon Parks's most famous image often is called *American Gothic* for the way cleaning woman Ella Watson, holding her broom in front of an American flag, eerily echoes the famous Grant Wood painting of a farmer and his sister. To many, the image captures a woman who is a victim of the economic and racial times but who refuses to give up. As an African American, Parks experienced

racial discrimination firsthand and was determined to use his camera lens to expose the bigotry and injustice that he observed in Washington, D.C. Years later, in a 1999 interview, Parks said that the work of fellow FSA photographers inspired him in his own work. "I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs," he said.



In 1936, **Walker Evans** and writer James Agee spent time with three sharecropping farm families in Alabama. His photographs of the faces and the homes of these families became the defining images of poverty and misery resulting from the Great Depression and offered a view of the difficult life of tenants, who worked other people's land rather than their own. Their experiences in Alabama led Agee and Evans to publish a book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Rather than employing a small, portable camera, Evans intentionally used a bulky portrait camera. This required his subjects to stand in formal poses, which gave them an air of pride despite their poverty.



In March 1940, **Arthur Rothstein** visited a migrant labor camp in Visalia, California, and took photos of camp residents and their activities. Many of the migrant families living there had left their homes in the Plains because of the Dust Bowl and had headed to California looking for work, only to discover there was little work to be had. At that time, the government program to establish migrant labor camps was controversial, and Rothstein's FSA photographs were meant to show how well a migrant camp could function and improve the lives of the families that lived there. His images focused on how clean and well organized the camps were. Rothstein also became famous for his images of the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma and a tenant community in Gee's Bend, Alabama. 📷