Chapter 11

# Photography

Once you see the forlorn face of Florence Thompson, you will never forget her (Figure 11.1). With furrowed forehead, a faraway look, hand cupped to her chin in a gesture of uncertainty, two children shyly hiding their faces in the warmth of her shoulders, and an infant sleeping on her lap, the photograph is more than a simple portrait of a family. The image is reminiscent of the "Madonna and Child" religious icon known to millions because painters throughout the history of Christianity have captured it on canvas. But here in black and white is a real-life symbol for all parents struggling to survive and feed their families during the Great Depression and for all uncertain economic times. "Migrant Mother" is probably the world's most reproduced photograph in the history of photography because it makes people care about this mother on a deep, personal level.

But it was a picture that almost was not taken.

Dorothea Nutzhorn was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895. When she was 12 years old she took her mother's maiden name of Lange after her father left the family. As a child she suffered from polio that gave her a limp in her right leg for the rest of her life. Although she'd never held a camera, at 14 she wanted to be a photographer, because she said that her disability "gave her an almost telepathic connection with those who suffered." After studying at Columbia University under the photographer Clarence White, she moved in 1918 to San Francisco, where she enjoyed the Bay Area's bohemian lifestyle. She married the painter Maynard Dixon and had two sons. She supported her family through her studio photography business. By 1932, she had become an able portrait photographer

***If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough.***

***Robert Capa (Endre Ernő Friedmann) 1913–1954***
*PHOTOJOURNALIST*

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

**Figure 11.1**
*"Migrant Mother," 1936, by Dorothea Lange. The disturbing and touching story line of a woman alone with her children during the height of America's Great Depression spurred many to help others. But is she posing or wishing the photographer would leave?*

with a reputation for capturing the personalities of the rich San Francisco matrons of the day.

News reports of the terrible living conditions of rural Americans prompted Lange to want to document their lives. The country was undergoing the worst drought in its history; dust storms blew away the once-fertile topsoil. The stock market crashed in 1929 and farm prices plummeted, throwing millions out of work. People lived from day to day, and thousands of farmers from the Midwest and Great Plains who had lost their land and livelihoods took off in mattress-topped automobiles for the golden West. Lange obtained a job with the State of California to document agricultural labor conditions. She was teamed with social economist Dr. Paul Schuster Taylor, whom she later married.

After completion of the project, the head of the Resettlement Administration (RA), Rexford Tugwell, reviewed her pictures in Washington and promptly hired her.

The RA, later renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), was an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. President Franklin D. Roosevelt created it to help relocate farmers to more fertile farmland, obtain massive subsidies to offset the low prices farmers were getting for their crops, and convince the American public that controversial social programs needed to be passed by the conservative Congress. Thus, the FSA was more of a propaganda wing that the government used to get New Deal legislation through Congress than a direct aid to rural residents. Besides Lange, famous photographers who worked for the FSA were Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Gordon Parks, Arthur Rothstein, and Marion Post Wolcott (Figure 11.2).

The FSA photographers produced an exhaustive document of rural and urban life in America during the 1930s and 1940s that has never been equaled. Newspapers and magazines used their pictures because they were free. However, in 1943 the FSA was eliminated and its employees transferred to the Office of War Information, which was ended in 1945. Nevertheless, the images succeeded in helping pass New Deal legislation and also inspired other photographers to follow in their documentary footsteps. More

Regardless of how still and moving images are combined and presented, the stilled moment will always be important. A moving image shocks, illuminates, and entertains, but it is fleeting, quickly replaced by another picture. A stilled image, one that freezes time forever in a powerfully arresting moment, will always have the capacity to rivet a viewer's attention so that long-term analysis is possible.

## KEY TERMS

- Abu Ghraib
- Airbrush
- Allegorical
- American Civil Liberties Union
- Aperture
- Bitumen of Judea
- Collodion
- Contrast
- Crop
- Darkroom
- Depth of field
- Dioramas
- Doctors Without Borders
- Dust Bowl
- eBay
- Electromagnetic spectrum
- Emulsion
- Flash
- Flash mob
- Geneva Conventions
- Gelatin
- GIF
- Grain
- Impressionism
- Industrial Revolution
- JPG
- Large-format camera
- *Life* magazine
- Lithography
- Paparazzi
- Plate
- Polio
- Silver bromide
- Silver nitrate
- Surrealism
- TIF
- Visual cortex
- Visual journalists

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