The Story Behind the Iconic “Migrant Mother” Photograph and How Dorothea Lange Almost Didn’t Take It
by Maria Popova

How a serendipitous hand-lettered sign changed the history of photojournalism.

At the same time that pioneering photographer Berenice Abbott was busy capturing the urban fabric and trailblazing anthropologist Margaret Mead was laying the groundwork for modern anthropology, Dorothea Lange mastered the intersection of the two in her influential Depression-era photojournalism and documentary photography. In Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning (public library), Lange’s goddaughter Elizabeth Partridge, an accomplished and prolific author in her own right, presents a first-of-its-kind career-spanning monograph of the legendary photographer’s work, placing her most famous and enduring photographs in a biographical context that adds new dimension to these iconic images.

Among the biographical sketches is also the story of Lange’s best-known, infinitely expressive, most iconic photograph of all — Migrant Mother, depicting an agricultural worker named Florence Owens Thompson with her children — which came to capture the harrowing realities of the Great Depression not merely as an economic phenomenon but as a human tragedy.

Migrant Mother---Respond

In 1935, Lange and her second husband, the Berkeley economics professor and self-taught photographer Paul Taylor, were transferred to the Resettlement Administration (RA), one of Roosevelt’s New Deal programs designed to help the country recover from the depression. Lange began working as a Field Investigator and Photographer under Roy Stryker, head of the Information Division.

Texas picture---Respond

In early February of 1936, while living in a small two-bedroom house in California with Taylor and her two step-children, Lange received an assignment to photograph California’s rural and
urban slums and farmworkers. She was supposed to spend a month on the road, but severe weather along the coast delayed her departure. When she finally set out for Los Angeles, the first destination on her route, she wrote in a letter to Stryker:

Tried to work in the pea camps in heavy rain from the back of the station wagon. I doubt that I got anything. . . . Made other mistakes too. . . . I make the most mistakes on subject matter that I get excited about and enthusiastic. In other words, the worse the work, the richer the material was.

*Old Negro picture—Respond*

It was in the pea camps that she captured her most iconic image less than two weeks later — an image that, due to its unshakable grip of empathy, would transcend the status of mere visual icon and effect critical cultural awareness on both a social and political level. Partridge writes:

Two weeks of sleet and steady rain had caused a rust blight, destroying the pea crop. There was no work, no money to buy food. Dorothea approached “the hungry and desperate mother,” huddled under a torn canvas tent with her children. The family had been living on frozen vegetables they’d gleaned from the fields and birds the children killed. Working quickly, Dorothea made just a few exposures, climbed back in her car, and drove home.

Dorothea knew the starving pea pickers couldn’t wait for someone in Washington, DC to act. They needed help immediately. She developed the negatives of the stranded family, and rushed several photographs to the *San Francisco News*. Two of her images accompanied an article on March 10th as the federal government rushed twenty thousand pounds of food to the migrants.

*Picture 4--- Florence Owens Thompson family*

The most remarkable part of the story, however, is that this was an image Lange almost didn’t take: At the end of that cold and wretched winter, she had been on the road for almost a month, with only the insufficient protection of her camera lens between her and the desperate, soul-stirringly dejected living and working conditions of California’s migratory farm workers.
Downhearted and weary, both physically and psychologically, she decided she had seen and captured enough, packed up her clunky camera equipment, and headed north on Highway 101, bickering with herself in her notebook: “Haven’t you plenty of negatives already on the subject? Isn’t this just one more of the same?” But then something happened — a fleeting glance, one of those pivotal chance encounters that shape lives. Partridge transports us to that fateful March day:

The cold, wet conditions of Northern California gave way to sweltering heat in Los Angeles, a “vile town,” Dorothea wrote. By the beginning of March she was headed home, exhausted, her camera bags packed on the front seat beside her.

Hours later, the hand-lettered “Pea pickers camp” sign flashed by her. Did she have it in her to try one more time?

She did.

The long, hard rains that had delayed Dorothea at the outset of her journey had deluged the Nipomo pea pickers. And even as Dorothea drove north and homeward, the camp was still floundering in water and mud. Not long before Dorothea arrived, Florence Thompson and four of her six children, along with some of the other stranded migrants, had moved to a higher, sandy location nearby. Thompson left word at the first camp for her partner, Jim Hill, on where to find them. Earlier in the day he’d set off walking with Thompson’s two sons to find parts for their broken-down car.

The sandy camp in front of a windbreak of eucalyptus trees is where Dorothea pulled in and found Florence Thompson and her children. They were waiting for Hill and the boys to show up, for the ground to dry, for crops to ripen for harvesting. They were waiting for their luck to change.

In minutes, Dorothea took the photograph that would become the definitive icon of the Great Depression, intuitively conveying the migrants’ perilous predicament in the frame of her camera.

Complement Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning, illuminating in its entirety, with this excellent short film on the power of photojournalism and Susan Sontag on the violence of photography.

Images courtesy of Chronicle Books