

## Making Sense of Documentary Photography James Curtis

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A picture may be worth a thousand words, but you need to know how to analyze the picture to gain any understanding of it at all. Making Sense of Documentary Photography provides a place for students and teachers to grapple with the documentary images that often illustrate textbooks but are almost never considered as historical evidence in their own right. Written by James Curtis, this guide offers a brief history of documentary photography, examples of what questions to ask when examining a documentary photograph, and an annotated bibliography and list of online resources for documentary photography. James Curtis is Professor of History at the University of Delaware and Director of the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture. Curtis is the author of *The Fox at Bay: the Presidency of Martin Van Buren*, *Andrew Jackson and the Search for Vindication*, and *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth, FSA Photography Reconsidered*. Portions of this latter volume were the subject of a BBC documentary on photographs of Depression America. Curtis is currently at work on a book manuscript on the impact of racial attitudes on documentary photography during the 1930s.

### Introduction



Walker Evans, kitchen corner in Floyd Burroughs' home,  
Hale County, Alabama, 1936

Historians often regard photographs as a critical form of documentary evidence that hold up a mirror to past events. Public and scholarly faith in the realism of the

photographic image is grounded in a belief that a photograph is a mechanical reproduction of reality. Susan Sontag captured the essence of that faith in her monumental reverie *On Photography* when she wrote “Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it.” And in arranging these pieces to form historical mosaics, teachers and scholars have rarely paused to submit photographs to the usual tests applied to other forms of documentary evidence. For example, we have been trained to factor in the subjectivity of the author when we read autobiographical writing. But when we encounter an historical photograph, “shot for the record,” we often treat the image as the product of a machine and therefore an objective artifact.

Since they are regarded as inherently truthful, photographs are frequently used to illustrate history textbooks. Publishers, not authors, usually select images to accompany history texts, and the images are used merely as illustrations and not as historical documents in their own right. As a consequence, today’s history students miss out on the opportunity to explore the fascinating visual dimensions of the past, to play detective with a mountain of photographic images that far outnumber traditional written documents. This essay seeks to lay out strategies for subjecting photographs to the same tests we apply to written documents when we use them as historical evidence. Exercising such scrutiny, students can bring to light the narratives hidden within images that are not always examined, despite our traditional belief that “a picture is worth a thousand words.”

### **Early Documentary Photography**

Photographs came to America in 1839 and, like many immigrants of the same era, were quickly absorbed by the nation’s growing metropolitan areas. America’s first photographic image was the silver-plated, mirror-like object called a daguerreotype, after its inventor Louis Daguerre. This new photographic process was complicated and time consuming. Preparation of a single daguerreotype plate might consume as much as thirty minutes. Exposure of the plate in the camera required subjects to remain motionless for several more minutes lest the final image be blurred beyond recognition. Because of these technological demands, early photographic pioneers rarely strayed far from their urban studios where daguerreotypes were exposed, developed, and subsequently exhibited. Because early photographs were unique images, the only way to make and distribute inexpensive copies was through print processes such as lithography and engraving, where the photographic image was drawn by an artist.

The popularity of this new form of representation fostered myriad experiments, all aimed at making the entire photographic process cheaper, faster, and more portable. The introduction of ambrotypes and tintypes made possible the reproduction of paper prints from the photographic negative and thus a wider circulation of images. By the time of the Civil War, the daguerreotype and its descendents had entered the realm of middle-class consumer culture and established a popular following, often to the dismay of photographers sworn to uphold photography as an art form. Documentary photography developed during this period and was often consigned by art critics to the realm of journalism, an association that persists to the present. This consignment implied that documentary photographers were mere recorders, skilled technicians to be sure, but passive observers of the social scene and definitely not artists. Documentary photographers accepted this characterization in order to burnish the perceived realism

of their imagery. They posed as fact gatherers and denied having aesthetic or political agendas.

But the early practitioners of documentary photography, including acclaimed figures such as Mathew Brady, had no choice but to order the subject matter that fell within their photographic frame. Long exposure times meant that Brady and the photographers who worked for him could not capture combatants in action during the Civil War, and he had to be content with taking pictures of their bloated remains on the battlefield. In the aftermath of the 1863 battle of Gettysburg, photographer Alexander Gardner ordered that one of the fallen bodies be dragged forty yards and propped in a rocky corner. The resulting image, *Rebel Sharpshooter in Devil's Den*, continues to command attention despite the recent discovery of the photographer's manipulations.



William Henry Jackson, *Mt of the Holy Cross*, 1873

By the end of the Civil War, photography had already begun its unceasing march to the West, where government and corporate sponsorship helped William Henry Jackson establish himself as one of the nation's most prolific and adventurous cameramen. Jackson crafted images of monumental proportions such as the famous photograph above of Colorado's *Mt of the Holy Cross*, an image that Jackson's friend Thomas Moran used to execute a brilliant oil painting of the same name. Moran took considerable artistic liberty with his version of this legendary landscape by bisecting the foreground with a creek that never existed. Ironically, Jackson's original had also been altered, but out of necessity rather than aesthetic preference. Jackson had to wait until the end of the spring runoff before he could take his bulky camera equipment to a vantage point across from the mountain. To his dismay, he discovered that one arm of the fabled cross of snow had also melted. Jackson later restored that arm in his Denver darkroom. By this slight manipulation, he created one of America's most cherished icons of western expansion.

## Modern Documentary Photography

Two urban photographers, Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, took up the effort to explore the “wilderness” of the inner city and thereby establish documentary photography as a tool of social reform. Riis, a Danish immigrant and police reporter for the *New York Tribune*, continues to be revered for his late nineteenth-century expose of tenement conditions in New York’s Lower East Side and Lewis Hine has won lasting fame as a pictorial champion of working men and women and as a crusader against child labor during the progressive period. Riis and Hine shocked their contemporaries with dramatic images showing the human consequences of unchecked urban growth and industrial excess. Previous to their work, photos of the city celebrated urban architecture or provided perspectives that emphasized the city’s bustle, traffic, and commerce. Moreover, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, new processes (especially the “halftone”) allowed photographs to be inexpensively reproduced in newspapers, magazines, and books. This technological development vastly increased the dissemination of documentary images. Before the turn of the twentieth century, pictures of working and poor people were limited to portraits taken in photographic studios. The sensational impact of Riis’s and Hine’s photos was no accidental by-product, but rather the very essence of their photographic fieldwork.

Heir in many ways to the work of Riis and Hine, the Farm Security Administration Photographic Project (1935-1942) quickly surpassed the combined output of these two pioneers and is now recognized as the most famous of America’s documentary projects. Beginning under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration in 1935 and then the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937, a group that over time included about twenty men and women worked under the supervision of Roy E. Stryker to create a pictorial record of the impact of the Great Depression on the nation, primarily on rural Americans. This project, as photography historian Alan Trachtenberg has noted, “was perhaps the greatest collective effort . . . in the history of photography to mobilize resources to create a cumulative picture of a place and time.” Many of the eighty thousand photographs taken by the so-called FSA photographers were distributed by the agency to newspapers and magazines to build support for the rural programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. As FSA photographer Arthur Rothstein later recalled, “It was our job to document the problems of the Depression so that we could justify the New Deal legislation that was designed to alleviate them.”

FSA photographers criss-crossed the country documenting the plight of Dust Bowl refugees, southern sharecroppers, migrant agricultural workers, and finally Japanese Americans bound for internment camps in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. The FSA’s vast pictorial undertaking, as Stryker later recalled, endeavored to introduce “Americans to America.” This goal had a specific audience in mind: middle-class Americans who lived in cities far from the locales depicted in the photographs and who comprised the vast majority of the readers of the newspapers and magazines in which the FSA pictures were reproduced. For students of American culture, the FSA collection, now housed in the Library of Congress (and available online as part of the Library’s American Memory initiative) offers an unparalleled opportunity to use photographs as primary historical evidence.

### Who Took the Photograph?

If we are to determine the meaning of a documentary photograph we must begin by establishing the historical context for both the image and its creator. A documentary photographer is an historical actor bent upon communicating a message to an audience. Documentary photographs are more than expressions of artistic skill; they are conscious acts of persuasion. The work of the most accomplished photographers reveals a fervent desire to let images tell a story. Documentarians from Mathew Brady to Dorothea Lange succeeded because they understood the desires of their audience and did not shy from molding their images accordingly. Far from being passive observers of the contemporary scene, documentary photographers were active agents searching for the most effective way to communicate their views.

The following examples show how Jacob Riis used his camera not only to amass a quantity of sociological data but to assert his own assessment of immigrants and tenement life in New York City. Although Jacob Riis did not have an official sponsor for his photographic work, he clearly had an audience in mind when he recorded his dramatic urban scenes. Author of popular newspaper stories and the book *How the Other Half Lives*, an indictment of the living conditions of immigrant workers in New York City's Lower East Side neighborhood, Riis was much in demand as a lecturer. He converted many of his images into lantern slides that he used to great effect in his impassioned presentations. He no doubt had his middle-class clientele in mind when composing his pictures. Despite his own immigrant background, Riis' attitudes mirrored the prejudices of the dominant culture toward "foreigners." His reports on immigrant life—and his equally famous photographs—were important documents of urban conditions in late nineteenth-century urban America. But they were equally revealing as documents that showed how outsiders often reacted in horror to people who composed "the other half."

In his famous 1888 photograph *Bandit's Roost* (probably taken by an associate in an alley off of Mulberry Street in what is now New York's Chinatown district), Riis argued that the alley, like the tenement, was a breeding ground for disorder and criminal behavior.



Jacob A. Riis, *Bandit's Roost*, 1888

At first glance, the foreground figures in the photograph underscore the aura of menace created by Riis' caption. Two men appear to guard the alley entrance. Perched on the railing of the right-hand staircase is a third man who has assumed a casual, yet commanding, pose. Perhaps he is the ringleader of this gang. But what of the other ten figures in the image, the women leaning out the windows, the young child in the right background, the three figures on the opposite porch? There is nothing in their demeanor that suggests criminal behavior. If they were indeed part of a notorious gang, why would they be so willing to pose for the camera, especially since members of the police force often accompanied Riis on his photographic forays? How did Riis secure the cooperation of all these individuals? Certainly not by telling them that he wanted a picture of notorious criminals. Is this really a den of iniquity, as Riis would have us believe? In the background of the image, long lines of laundry stretch between the buildings. Riis was fond of saying that "the true line to be drawn between pauperism and honest poverty is the clothesline. With it begins the effort to be clean that is the first and best evidence of a desire to be honest."

Like many documentary photographers who followed him, Jacob Riis employed children as symbols of society's neglect. Riis called his small subjects "Street Arabs" thereby engaging powerful middle-class sentiments about both exoticism and itinerancy. "The Street Arab has all the faults and all the virtues of the lawless life he leads," Riis warned his readers in his 1890 exposé *How the Other Half Lives*. But how did Riis gain the cooperation of these stealthy and suspicious subjects? He hired the young "toughs" in this picture to reenact a common crime by having them mug one of their own. He then paid all the boys with cigarettes.



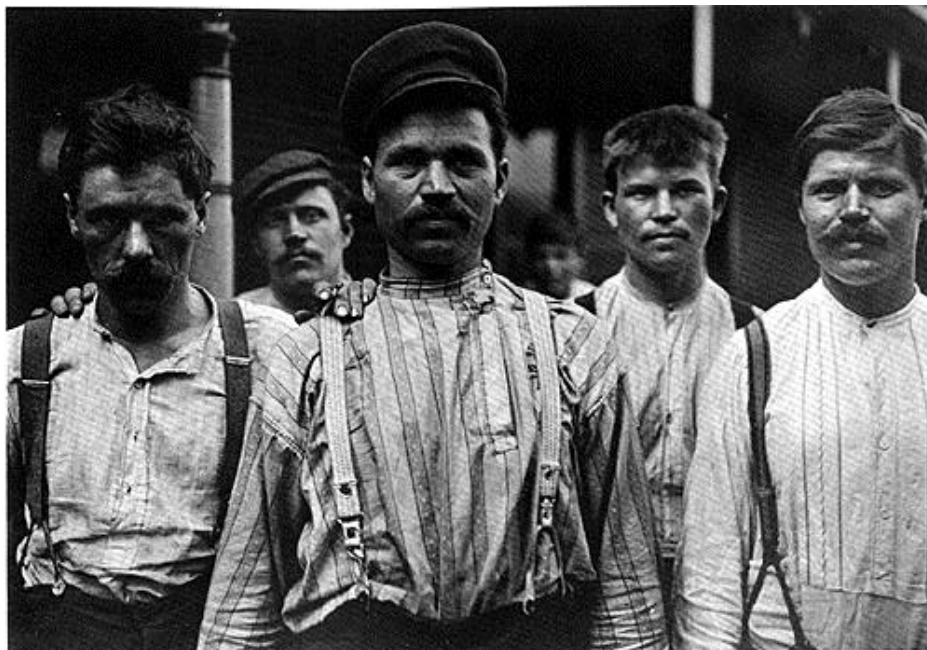
Jacob A. Riis (Richard Hoe Lawrence),  
*A Growler Gang in Session (Robbing a Lush)*, 1887

Riis did not limit such arrangements to the street toughs but posed more than a half a dozen images of young boys sleeping in stairwells and doorways. The pictures appear to have been taken in broad daylight and the small subjects are obviously pretending to be asleep. Whether they were indeed homeless remains a question open to modern viewers, but not one likely to have been asked by the photographer's contemporaries.



Jacob A. Riis, *Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters*, c. 1880s

### **Why and For Whom Was the Photograph Taken?**



Lewis Hine, *Russian steel workers, Homestead, Pa., 1908*

Lewis Hine took many of his most famous photographs while working for social reform agencies, such as New York's Charity Organization Society and the National Child Labor Committee. (The Charity Organization Society began in 1896 and the National Child Labor Committee was organized in 1904, just two of many reform organizations during the Progressive era that advocated for the amelioration of poverty,



improvements to working conditions, and the end of child labor.) The reform goals of these organizations had a direct bearing on Hine's work. In 1908 he spent three months taking photographs for the Pittsburgh Survey, a pioneering investigation of working and health conditions in that steel-producing center. Hine's photographs illustrated the multi-volume report that caused a sensation in reform circles. In a manner similar to his photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island and child workers, Hine's Pittsburgh Survey pictures addressed the sympathies of viewers who would come across them in the pages of reform publications. Subjects such as the Russian steelworkers captured by Hine in 1908 were depicted without the wariness, the underlying fear, that characterized many of Jacob Riis's photographs of the urban poor. On the contrary, the immigrant workers in Hine's photographs were portrayed as worthy of viewers' sympathy, exploited and yet still dignified, deserving candidates for U.S. citizenship.



Arthur Rothstein, *Negroes, descendants of former slaves of the Pettway Plantation, Gee's Bend, Alabama, 1937*

While reformers used documentary photography to illustrate the goals of reform movements, photographs could also illustrate the biases and racist assumptions of private and government aid agencies. Arthur Rothstein took the photograph above in Gee's Bend, Alabama, in the spring of 1937. Rothstein's employer, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), had been providing assistance to this community of African-American sharecroppers for more than two years by the time the young government photographer arrived. Nevertheless, Rothstein was instructed to photograph the community as if there had been no such assistance granted—to capture its so-called primitive condition and thus elicit support for the kind of federal aid that the FSA was providing to rural farmers.

Rothstein was told that the families at Gee's Bend lived on an old plantation, abandoned by white owners three decades earlier. Isolated from the surrounding



society, Gee's Bend appeared to the government as a throwback to tribal society in Africa. The community was marked by a high rate of out-of-wedlock births, Rothstein was told, and the large, sprawling families lived in rude shacks that they erected themselves made of sticks and mud. The photograph above is typical of the more than fifty images Rothstein recorded during his visit. The caption for the image says that this is a single-family group. That caption implies that the sole male figure in the picture has fathered all of the children present. Both the pose and the caption stand at odds with normal FSA practice of showing small white families, lest the presence of many children put off viewers rather than enlist their sympathy.

Rothstein showed no such restraint in his photographs or his captions. In a number of captions he spoke of large families of *Negroes at Gees Bend, Alabama*, referring to them as "Descendants of slaves of the Pettway plantation. They are still living very primitively on the plantation." To further emphasize how the former plantation had fallen into ruin, Rothstein took the following picture of the Pettway mansion which he wrote was now "occupied by Negroes."



Arthur Rothstein, *Home of the Pettways, now inhabited by Negroes.*  
*At Gees Bend, Alabama, 1937*

Stripped of their didactic captions, Rothstein's images provide visual clues suggesting that the African-American residents of Gee's Bend lived not in a primitive society but in an economically depressed condition similar to that of white sharecroppers in the rural South. Far from proving that the hamlet's occupants were unable to care for themselves, the images demonstrate a high level of competence and self-sufficiency. The notched log timbers of these buildings provided ample proof of the artisanal skill of the residents. As for his courtyard picture, Rothstein neglected to identify his main subject as the village elder who stood proudly before his extended

family. The man was a grandfather and great grandfather, and this is a multigenerational portrait. The fathers of the children do not appear in the picture, either because Rothstein excluded them or because they were working at the time the photo was taken.

### **How Was the Photograph Taken?**

In the modern era of digital imagery and motor driven cameras, it is easy to forget that photographers like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine operated with equipment that imposed constraints on their actions and their ability to craft a candid scene. To gain access to the alleyway in *Bandit's Roost*, for example, Riis had to command his subjects to be still lest stray motion ruin his photograph. Perhaps he negotiated with the alley dwellers himself; more likely he relied on his companions to help set the scene while he unpacked and set up his camera equipment. Riis' famous after dark photographs required even more planning and preparation. To capture the dim tenement interiors that so shocked his audience, he employed a new flash powder, which resulted in the often startled expressions of the people he photographed and the depiction of interiors with harsh lights and shadows that may have exaggerated their actual appearance. Riis took the image below in a crowded tenement room where single males paid *Five Cents a Spot* for a night's lodging. Riis entered this space with the help of the landlord, who received assurances that he would not be prosecuted for running an illegal-lodging house. Riis also needed the cooperation of the sleeping subjects, who had to appear to be awakened by his flash. In order to create that appearance, Riis had to have them pose with their faces toward the camera and then hold still while he ignited his flash powder and made the exposure.



Jacob Riis, *Five Cents Lodging, Bayard Street, c. 1889*

Even with subsequent advances in film speed and camera technology, documentary photographers of the 1930s continued to direct the actions of their subjects, although they steadfastly denied doing so. Walker Evans was the most outspoken of the FSA photographers in his renunciation of any arrangements prior to exposure. Yet Evans's camera of choice was a bulky 8X10 view camera that had to be mounted on a tripod.

Like Riis, he needed the cooperation of his subjects, who agreed to remain motionless while he made the exposure. If they moved, they would blur the image. Evans chose the large view camera because he could make prints directly from the 8X10 negatives and therefore achieve sharp focus throughout the photographic frame. Historians and art critics have long praised Evans's photography for its clarity and precision without recognizing the ways in which his reliance on large format photography necessitated the very arrangements he would later denounce.

In this 1936 picture of African-American men in front of a Vicksburg, Mississippi, barbershop, Evans arranged his subjects so that they appear to be unaware of his presence. One of the males seated on the bench is turned at right angles to the



Walker Evans, 1936

camera. By posing his subjects in this way, Evans suggests that this is a candid, unposed image. Yet the picture is a product of the large view camera. Evans had to set up his tripod across the street and had to wait for a break in street traffic or stop the flow of traffic altogether. Evans achieved his goal, and critics praised this image as a candid presentation of a sidewalk gathering in the black section of Vicksburg.

If you compare the image to companion photographs Evans took the same day, it further suggests that the photographer might have directed the positions and poses of his subjects, since the same men appear in five different compositions. In one alternate view, there are four men on the bench. The new arrival is actually a white man (second from the left of the bench), who may have been seated in the automobile in the previous image. Viewed by itself, this photograph suggests a degree of interracial harmony in Vicksburg. As for the white man, he may have been Evans's tour guide, in which case his insertion is actually an act of dominion, one which the black men are powerless to resist.



Walker Evans, 1936

### What Can Companion Images Tell Us?

Documentary photographers rarely take a single photograph of a given subject. If only to ensure that they have backups for their master composition, they usually take a series of pictures and later select the one image that best relates their sense of the scene. In this selection process they may decide to save the “outtakes” (as they are called in the film industry) or to destroy them lest they distract attention from their chosen image. FSA photographers had no such opportunity to edit their own work. Government regulations required them to turn in all pictures from an assignment. The FSA collection therefore offers scholars an unparalleled opportunity to place masterworks, such as Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (1936), in the context of companion images taken on the same day. (See activity on Web site.) This visual evidence offers a much more reliable guide to the photographer’s original intent than the artist’s recollections recorded decades after the fact.

Companion images to another famous FSA photograph, Russell Lee’s *Christmas Dinner in Iowa* (1936), would suffer a similar fate. Lee was by far the most prolific of Roy Stryker’s photographers and certainly the most well-traveled. Shortly after joining the photographic project, he accepted an assignment to document the lives of white sharecroppers in rural Iowa. Near the small hamlet of Smithland, Lee took a series of pictures of a tenant farmer struggling to make a living on a landscape that had been ravaged by drought. The photograph below shows the farmer’s children standing at a table eating dinner on Christmas day. The place at the head of the table is vacant and the image raises the troubling prospect of parental abandonment. Lee took another photograph of this meager meal, this one showing the father in his accustomed place at the head of the table.



Russell Lee, *Christmas Dinner in Iowa*, 1936

The picture above became an instant classic in part because it provided a startling counterpoint to more common images of a bounteous holiday feast spread out before a thankful family. Long after his retirement from government service, Lee was asked about the circumstances surrounding *Christmas Dinner in Iowa*. Lee remembered the name of the farmer, Earl Pauley, and recalled taking a number of pictures on the farm. He told an interviewer that Pauley was a widower and was doing his best to provide for his needy children. These recollections added power and poignancy to Lee's portrait.

Yet in this instance, Lee's memory betrayed him, for the FSA file contains a photograph of Pauley's wife standing in the doorway of the shack with two of the children who later posed for the dinner photograph. This hitherto unpublished image provides clear evidence that Lee assigned places at the dinner table. He asked the father to step out of the scene but never made room for the mother. Her presence would have undercut the dramatic scene that Lee had in mind.



Russell Lee, *Mrs. Earl Pauley and some of her children*, 1936

### How Was the Photograph Presented?

Many of America's most famous documentary photographs have resulted from a photographer's ability to capture a compelling scene, whether by arranging subject matter or experimenting with alternate compositions. This active direction might continue well after the scene was frozen on film. Photographers could add material after the fact, most often titles or descriptive captions designed to direct the gaze of prospective viewers and underscore the image's intended meaning. Such was clearly the case with Jacob Riis' *Bandit's Roost*. Riis knew at the time of exposure how he would use this image. He would transform the photograph into a lantern slide to illustrate one of his famous reform lectures. Riis embellished these lectures with an exaggerated vocabulary of which this title is but one example. In so doing, Riis created powerful interpretive frameworks for the way viewers understood the photographs in his lantern slide lectures. The photographs drove home his message; in return, the phrases that proved popular with Riis' audience could serve as titles for subsequent pictures.

Lewis Hine employed similar strategies in his photographs of newly arrived immigrants and downtrodden factory workers. Like Riis, Hine placed great faith in the power of accompanying words to drive home the point of his images.



Lewis Hine, *One Arm and Four Children*, 1910

Hine recorded the photograph above for the section of the Pittsburgh Survey that dealt with industrial accidents. To illustrate how families were victimized when the head of the household could no longer work, Hine posed an amputee father in the foreground with the man's wife and four children slightly to the rear. From a standpoint of composition and aesthetic design, the image left much to be desired. Although Hine made willing subjects of this man and his family, the poses were awkward and the facial expressions of the children threatened to undercut the pathos



that Hine intended. Hine overcame these obstacles by providing a caption for the picture that riveted viewers' attention on the problem of industrial accidents. He labeled the image *One Arm and Four Children*. In this and other photographs for the Pittsburgh Survey, Hine borrowed the language of the reformers and affixed it to his images. In so doing he fused the power of the raw image with the persuasiveness of the written word.

By contrast, Walker Evans steadfastly refused to title his photographs or to attach descriptive captions. In 1941, he and James Agee published *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a collaboration since hailed as America's premier work of documentary reportage. Unlike Hine's photographs for the Pittsburgh Survey, Evans' images stand alone at the beginning of the book. They were not designed to illustrate Agee's text, and the images bear no captions whatsoever. When the photograph below appeared in the second edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, it was part of a series of images of the Burroughs family (identified pseudonymously in the text as the Gudgers) and their home. Careful reading of Agee's precise description of the Burroughs' home reveals evidence of the arrangements Evans made to craft the image of the kitchen corner. Evans removed a bench from along the wall and brought a caned chair from across the room to stand in its stead, and he moved the large crockery vessel (probably a butter churn) onto the cupboard. He also likely cleared the table of its place settings, since Agee describes the family's habit of placing their dishes back on the table after washing them. In this case, while Agee's words were not presented directly with the photographs, they still provide clues that help viewers to interpret the photo as a reflection of Evans' vision as much as a document of the Burroughs' environment.



Walker Evans, 1936



## Model Interpretation

Over the past several years, I have been working on a book on FSA photography in which I hope to show the influence of 1930s racial attitudes on the photographs taken by Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and their colleagues. I have been particularly interested in a group of photographs that Russell Lee took of Mexican households in San Antonio and the Rio Grande valley in the winter and spring of 1939. The following images are typical of Lee's photographic coverage of housing and health conditions in the several Mexican enclaves he visited. Since it was not the practice of FSA photographers to record the names of their subjects, we have to piece together this particular family series by visual identification. We can deduce that these images are of the same family, because the young girl appears in figures one, two, and four, while the young boy appears in figures one and three. It would appear that the man in figure one is a single head of household because no adult female appears in any of the images. It also appears that Lee took the doorway shot first and then proceeded to the interior of the house. The captions for the four images read as follows:



Figure 1: Mexican father and children in doorway of their home made of scrap lumber.



Figure 2: Interior of Mexican home. San Antonio, Texas.



Figure 3: Mexican boy sick in bed.  
San Antonio, Texas.



Figure 4: Corner of bedroom.  
Mexican section, San Antonio, Texas.

These images offer evidence about how photographer Russell Lee managed to enter Mexican households and gain access to such a private space as the family bedroom. We know from interviews with Lee that he did not speak Spanish, yet he was able to gain the cooperation of his Mexican subjects to record intimate details of their lives. Figure 1 is a key image in this regard because it has the father standing in the doorway of his home in a pose that suggests both parental authority and an ability to provide for his offspring. He is dressed in a clean white shirt and his daughter in a dress with a bow in her hair. This attire is similar to what a family might have worn in a visit to a photographer's studio to have their portrait recorded. In effect, Lee gained the cooperation of his subjects by allowing them to present themselves to the camera. Little did they know that Lee would undercut the father's authority by writing a brief caption that called attention to the makeshift construction of the house.

Lee's strategy apparently worked, for the remainder of the series is shot indoors. What did Lee seek in these interior shots? Figure 2 provides several clues. He has posed the young girl at the entrance to the kitchen, and he shows her drinking out of a metal cup. We are to presume that she has dipped water from the bucket that sits in front of her on top of the stove. From examining other photographs that Lee took in San Antonio, we can surmise that he was calling attention to the lack of proper sanitary facilities in Mexican households and to the dangers of drawing from contaminated water supplies. In the foreground of the image, his focus falls on the kitchen's dirt floor. In the captions for other photographs he labels such floors as health hazards. As if to drive home his point, he takes a picture of a young boy lying in bed [Figure 3], and the caption claims that he is sick. Yet a close examination of this image shows that the youngster was well enough to pose in the doorway in the first image in the series. The

final photograph in the series is by far the most intriguing. The young girl stands on a bed and points to objects assembled in the corner of the room. The caption is silent on the meaning of these objects, but from other Lee photographs of similar assemblages we learn that this is a home altar, and that most Mexican households have such sacred spaces. From the date of these photographs (March 1939) we learn that Lee visited the majority of Mexican households during Lent. Lee's subjects may have given him access to interiors because they wanted him to record their religious displays and to see the extra decorations they applied for the observance of the Easter season.

While Lee duly recorded these altars, he rarely made mention of them in his captions except to say that many of them were "quite primitive." He employed that term much the same as Arthur Rothstein did in captioning his photographs of Gee's Bend, Alabama. Scholars have amply documented the importance of Mexican home altars, which were constructed by female heads of households who also passed the tradition down to their daughters. Presumably, the young girl in the series is learning the craft from her mother. Yet why would Lee exclude the mother from the series? Perhaps she was absent, although the daughter's dress and the bow in her hair suggest that the mother might have outfitted her daughter for the photographs. Lee appears to have been duplicating the strategy he employed in creating *Christmas Dinner in Iowa*. Here is a family torn apart by poverty. Yet in his Iowa photographs, Lee was creating images designed to elicit sympathy for hard-working white sharecroppers who needed temporary federal assistance to weather hard times. Lee's photographs and their captions suggest that he had no such agenda in mind in his visit to Texas. Quite the contrary, his images and captions of Mexican households called attention to dirt, disease, and disorder and suggested that the Mexicans were a primitive people unable to care for themselves. Ironically this factual finding was not a prelude to a call for help for Mexicans but a dramatic statement that if white Texans did not receive federal assistance that they would end up in a primitive condition akin to their Mexican neighbors.

## Documentary Photography Online

**America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA and OWI, ca. 1935-1945**

**Library of Congress, American Memory Project**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

This extraordinary resource features nearly 45,000 images taken by government photographers with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Office of War Information (OWI) during the New Deal and Second World War. These images show the impact of the Great Depression on farmers, life during the Dust Bowl, and mobilization campaigns for the Second World War. This site includes approximately 1,600 color photographs, as well as selections from two popular collections: "*Migrant Mother Photographs*" and "*Photographs of Signs Enforcing Racial Discrimination*." Each photograph is accompanied by the original captions plus the negative number, which allows users to order copies from the prints and photographs division of the Library of Congress.

**American Indians of the Pacific Northwest**  
**Library of Congress, American Memory Project**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/wauhtml/aipnhome.html>

This digital archive includes more than 2,300 photographs illustrating the everyday lives of American Indians in the Northwest Coast and Plateau regions of the Pacific Northwest. The materials illustrate American Indian housing, clothing, crafts, transportation, education, employment, and other aspects of everyday life. Items were drawn from the collections of the University of Washington Libraries, the Cheney Cowles Museum/Eastern Washington State Historical Society in Spokane, and the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle.

**Architecture and Interior Design for 20th Century America: Photographs by Samuel Gottscho and William Schleisner, 1935-1955**

**Library of Congress, American Memory Project**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gschtml/gotthome.html>

This photo archive features more than 29,000 images, primarily of architectural subjects such as interiors and exteriors of homes, stores, offices, factories, and historic buildings. Photographs were made chiefly in the northeastern United States, especially the New York City area and Florida, and include pictures of the homes of notable Americans and of several U.S. presidents, as well as color images of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair. Many of the photographs, commissioned by architects, designers, owners, and architectural publications, document important achievements in American 20th-century architecture and interior design.

**California Heritage Digital Image Access Project**  
**Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley**

<http://sunsite.Berkeley.EDU/CalHeritage/>

More than 10,000 digitally-reproduced photographs illustrate California's history and culture. The site, searchable by keyword, features photographs of natural landscapes, Native Americans, San Francisco, Japanese relocation during World War II, and Californians from diverse backgrounds. Text accompanying each image is limited to artist/photographer, subject, and date.

**Connecticut History Online**

**Connecticut Historical Society, Thomas H. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut, and the Mystic Seaport Museum**

<http://www.lib.uconn.edu/cho/>

This pilot site offers more than 4,300 images depicting Connecticut's history from the beginning of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century. The images are divided into five categories: Livelihood; Diversity; Lifestyle; Infrastructure; and Environment. Each image includes notes on the creator, date, and place created, medium, repository information, and a brief (40-word) description of the subject.

**Florida Photographic Collection**

**Florida State Archives**

<http://www.dos.state.fl.us/fpc/>

This site provides more than 20,000 digitized photographs, including historical landscape scenes, buildings, and people from all parts of Florida and throughout Florida's history, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. A 15-word caption

accompanies each image. The digitized collection is searchable by subject, photographer, keyword, and date.

### **William Gedney Photographs and Writings**

**Digital Scriptorium, Duke University**

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/gedney>

Photographer William Gedney's work and writings, from the mid-1950s to the 1980s, are presented here. Gedney captured everyday life of people in places as diverse as Brooklyn, Kansas, India, and Europe. The site boasts more than 4,900 of his prints, workprints, and contact sheets. Photographs are arranged into 12 series: Composers; Cross Country; Europe; India; Kansas; Kentucky; New York; San Francisco; St. Joseph's School for the Deaf; The Farm; Night Series; and Miscellaneous. Each image is accompanied by title and a 5-10 word note on the subject matter and date taken.

### **Hawaiian Newspapers, War Records, and Trust Territory Image Collections**

**University of Hawai'i System Libraries**

<http://128.171.57.100/>

Photographs document the history of Hawaii and Micronesia from 1834 to the 1990s. The "Hawaii War Records" collection provides access to more than 1,300 photographs documenting the impact of World War II on Hawaii and its people. The photographs, from the Honolulu *Star Bulletin* and Honolulu *Advertiser*, are indexed by year from 1941 to 1945 and are searchable by subject. Photographs document such war-related activities as war bond drives, air-raid evacuations, and silk stocking salvage collections. The Trust Territories archive provides access to 8,000 photographs of U.S. programs in education, health, political, and economic development in the islands of Micronesia from 1947 to 1994. The photographs are indexed by reel number but searchable by subject.

### **Helios: The Smithsonian American Art Museum Photography Collection**

**Smithsonian American Art Museum**

<http://AmericanArt.si.edu/helios/index.html>

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is closed for renovations until 2003, but this site allows visitors to browse through more than 300 of the museum's photographs in the "Photography Online" exhibit. These include "American Photographs: The First Century" (<http://nmaa-ryder.si.edu/collections/exhibits/helios/amerphotos.html>), featuring more than 175 daguerrotypes and photographs from the 19th and early 20th centuries, including Civil War images, western landscapes, and people at work and play from 1839 to 1939; "Between Home and Heaven" (<http://nmaa-ryder.si.edu/collections/exhibits/helios/homeandheaven.html>), offering 90 recent landscape photographs taken throughout the United States; and "Secrets of the Dark Chamber: The Art of the American Daguerreotype" (<http://nmaa-ryder.si.edu/collections/exhibits/helios/darkchamber.html>).

### **History of the American West, 1860-1920: Photographs from the Collection of the Denver Public Library**

**Library of Congress, American Memory Project**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/codhtml/hawphome.html>

This site features more than 30,000 photographs taken between 1860 and 1920, including images of Colorado towns, landscapes, mining scenes, and members of more

than 40 Native Americans tribes living West of the Mississippi River. The special presentations on this site include: a gallery of more than 30 photographs depicting the dwellings, children, and daily lives of Native American women; more than 30 images of buildings, statues, and parks in Denver, Colorado; and roughly 20 World War II-era photographs of the 10th Mountain Division, ski troops based in Colorado who fought in Italy during the war.

**Images of African Americans from the 19th Century  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library Digital  
Library Collection**

[http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/images\\_aa19/](http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/images_aa19/)

Drawn from collections of family photographs, African-American school photographs, and personal collections, this site contains more than 650 nineteenth-century images, including prints, original negatives, and transparencies. The images in this archive depict the social, political, and cultural worlds of their African American subjects. Images are grouped by categories that include the Civil War, cultural expression, education, family, genre pictures, labor, organizations and institutions, politics, portraiture, Reconstruction, religion, slavery, and the social life and customs of African Americans.

**National Museum of American History Virtual Exhibitions  
Smithsonian Institution**

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/ve/index.htm>

Several of the National Museum of American History virtual exhibits present photographs. “Freeze Frame: Eadweard Muybridge’s Photography of Motion” (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/muybridge/>) explores the most famous work of English photographer Eadweard Muybridge with more than 60 photographs. “Photographing History: Fred J. Maroon and the Nixon Years, 1970-1974” (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/maroon/index.htm>) exhibits more than 25 photographs taken during the last four years of Richard M. Nixon’s presidency by Fred J. Maroon. “A Visual Journey: Photographs by Lisa Law, 1965-1971” (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/lisalaw/index.htm>) offers roughly 50 images from the 1960s counterculture as seen through the lens of photographer Lisa Law’s camera from 1965 to 1971.

**New Deal Network: A Guide to the Great Depression of the 1930s  
Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute**

<http://www.newdeal.feri.org/library/index.htm>

This site presents more than 4,000 photographs that document life in America during the Great Depression and the New Deal. Photographs are drawn from the National Archives, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, and many other sources. Photo database subject headings include: Culture (art, film, music, theater, and writing); Construction (conservation, historical projects, housing, recreational facilities, and transportation); Social programs (education, health care, production and redistribution of goods, professional services, and recreation); Federal agencies; Public figures; and Disaster relief.



### **Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters, 1862-1912**

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/pshome.html>

This collection illustrates the story of settlement on the Great Plains from 1862 to 1912. The 3,000 glass plate negatives from the Solomon Butcher photograph collection depict everyday life in central Nebraska, with images of businesses, farms, people, churches, and fairs in Custer, Buffalo, Dawson, and Cherry counties.

### **Still Picture Unit**

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

[http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/media\\_formats/photographs\\_in\\_college\\_park.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/media_formats/photographs_in_college_park.html)

NARA has placed selected finding aids (including introductory text and captions) and photographs online, although they are not always directly linked. These pages are not well-designed, but the information is clear. Image files are high quality, so downloads may be slow. "Photographs of the American West 1861-1912"

([http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/research\\_topics/american\\_west/american\\_west.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/american_west/american_west.html)) features 196 photographs that document westward migration and the development of America's western frontier.

"Pictures of African Americans During World War II" ([http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/research\\_topics/african\\_americans\\_during\\_wwii/african\\_americans\\_during\\_world\\_war\\_2.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/african_americans_during_wwii/african_americans_during_world_war_2.html))

depicts African Americans in military training, in combat, and on the home front.

"Pictures of the American City" ([http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/research\\_topics/american\\_cities/american\\_cities\\_pictures.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/american_cities/american_cities_pictures.html)) provides 170

photographs depicting the development of the American city from the early nineteenth century to the present. "Pictures of World War II" ([http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/research\\_topics/world\\_war\\_2\\_photos/world\\_war\\_2\\_photos.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/research_topics/world_war_2_photos/world_war_2_photos.html))

offers selected photographs depicting the activities of Americans during World War II.

### **Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880-1920**

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/detroit/dethome.html>

This archive offers more than 25,000 glass negatives and transparencies, as well as 300 color photolithograph prints, mostly of the eastern United States. A smaller group within the larger collection features about 900 Mammoth Plate Photographs taken by William Henry Jackson along several railroad lines in the United States and Mexico in the 1880s and 1890s, including views of California, Wyoming, and the Canadian Rockies. Many photographs were published as postcards.

### **Washington As It Was: Photographs by Theodor Horydczak, 1923-1959**

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/thhtml/thhome.html>

Presents approximately 14,350 photographs by Theodor Horydczak (1890-1971) documenting the Washington metropolitan era between the 1920s and 1950s. Subjects include the architecture (interiors and exteriors) of government and residential buildings; street scenes; views of neighborhoods; images of laborers constructing the



Memorial Bridge; and important events such as the 1932 Bonus March and the 1933 World Series.

### **Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America**

**James Allen, Collector**

<http://www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary/>

James Allen has assembled a collection of chilling photographs and postcards taken at lynchings throughout America, primarily from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This Web site, a companion to the book *Without Sanctuary*, offers more than 80 photographs with captions, and most images also have links to more extensive, 150-word descriptions of the circumstances behind that particular situation. Please note: these images are very disturbing and may not be appropriate for younger students.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Frassanito, William. *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time* (New York, 1975).

This pioneering work on photographs as historical documents details the many manipulations that photographers made in their chronicle of the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg.

Goldberg, Vicki. *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

This compilation combines early writings on photography plus some of the most recent interpretations of the power of the image in contemporary culture.

Hales, Peter Bacon. *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

Hales provides the indispensable guide to the history of nineteenth-century photography and to the creation and reform of urban America. His chapter on Jacob Riis places both the reformer and his photographs in their respective cultural contexts. In *William Henry Jackson and the Transformation of the American Landscape* (Philadelphia, 1988) Hales shows the critical role that photography played in westward expansion.

Hurley, F. Jack. *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1972).

This is the first of many books describing the scope of the Farm Security Administration's photographic project. Unfortunately there is little visual analysis of the famous FSA photographs sprinkled throughout the text.

O'Neal, Hank. *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and Its People, 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976).

Like Hurley, O'Neal bases his narrative on interviews with FSA photographers recorded long after they had taken the pictures that he includes in this lavishly-illustrated book.

Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover, 1971).

Dover publications reissue of Riis's classic study of tenement life in New York's lower east side gains a new immediacy with the publisher's insertion of 100 of Riis's photographs at key points throughout the text.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

Although more than a quarter century has passed since its publication, Sontag's brilliant reverie on the photographic medium remains essential reading for all students and teachers of photographic history.

Stott, William. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Stott provided one of the first extended definitions of documentary photography and his formulations continue to influence current scholarship.

Trachtenberg, Alan. *America and Lewis Hine: Photographs, 1904-1940* (New York: Aperture, 1977).

Although primarily an exhibit catalogue of Hine's most memorable images, this book contains insightful analysis on the formation of the documentary movement.