



John Vachon (1914-1975) was a long-term photographer for the Farm Security Administration (which later merged with the Office of War Information). As such, he helped to document American life during the Great Depression and into the war years.

Vachon's letters, especially to his wife (Penny), help us to better understand not just his pictures but the time frame in which he worked. Miles Orvell uses those photos and letters, coupled with his own commentary, to explain what people at the FSA hoped to accomplish:

Above all, from 1935 to 1943 the government, through the Farm Security Administration, conducted the greatest documentary effort in history, sending more than forty photographers into the field and across the United States to collect images of American life that would result in an archive of 165,000 classified FSA prints, with an additional 100,000 negatives gathered from other sources and put into the general archive.

Most of the FSA images were taken under the direction of [Roy] Stryker, the chief of the Historical Unit, who managed and directed from two to a dozen photographers at any given time (depending on available funding), spread out across the nation.

[John] Vachon toiled under Roy Stryker longer than virtually any other FSA photographer (six years), and he went on, before being drafted into the army, to work briefly for the Standard Oil Company, which was gathering a photographic archive ostensibly relating to oil production, again under Stryker's direction. (John Vachon's America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II, by John Vachon and Miles Orvell, page 5.)

Although he took some incredible pictures, Vachon's work is less well known than (for example) Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" photos. Why is that?

A primary reason was that, unlike better-known photographers of the era, he produced no single picture or set of pictures that achieved iconic status. Fame is partly a function of accident and timing, as well as the photographer's ability to advance him- or herself in the competitive world of photojournalism. And here Vachon may have had himself to blame, and his own habits of self-deprecation: immensely gifted yet deeply suspicious of his gifts, Vachon was anything but self-promoting.

Another possible reason for his general neglect is that he began photographing for the agency in 1937, after Evans, Lange, Shahn, Rothstein and others had already established their reputations by photographing largely rural and farming subjects, often in the South or in dust bowl regions. (John Vachon's America, page 5.)

Yet ... we have Vachon's compelling picture of a "worker at a carbon black plant" in Sunray, Texas. What is a carbon black plant? Vachon personally answers that question in a November 11, 1942 letter to his wife Penny:

This afternoon I worked in a carbon black plant. Do you know what a carbon black plant is? It's where they burn natural gas with insufficient oxygen and make carbon which is powdery black stuff in big bags worth 3 cents a pound, used in making tires, paints, & numerous other places.

The [Texas] panhandle is the seat of the carbon black industry, and on any given day in any given spot you can look all around you and in 6 or 7 corners 40 miles away, no fooling, you see little black places above the horizon. These are the C.B. plants. Then as you get nearer, naturally, the little black place gets bigger and bigger. From 5 or 10 miles it's a huge black cloud out there ahead of you. Then you drive right up to it and it's just exactly like driving from a sunny day into the middle of night.

They make wonderful backgrounds for pictures for quite some distance, and look exactly like dust storms I've seen pictures of, and I'll bet that's just what they were mistaken for by some dumb FSA photographers I could mention.

The one I worked in today had 300 what they call hot houses. Each hot house has several hundred gas jets burning. I went in one that was off, then they turned it on for me and I got a picture before it got very hot and got out. It's a beautiful weird sight inside. High mass.

... Anyway, in working there, I got dirtier, that is blacker, than I have ever been in my life. Really black all over. Right through the clothes it goes. I washed carefully my face and hands, but I'm leaving the rest for a while, it's really kind of beautiful. It gets very shiny when you rub it.

About the best pictures I got this year, I think, will prove to be the portraits of some of the black faced workers there. I got so excited about these guys that I shot up all the film I had with me, and didn't get pix of the buildings, and various operations. So I'll have to go back again. And I'll sure make some more of those portraits. (John Vachon's America, page 227.)

This image is one of those portraits. Vachon took it—in 1942—at a [carbon black plant](#) in Sunray, Texas.

Click on the image for a better view. Part of the "Bound for Glory" exhibition from the Library of Congress.

Credits:

Image 55 (of 70) included in the Exhibition, "Bound for Glory," online courtesy Library of Congress. The LOC describes this reproduction, from a color slide, as follows:

John Vachon. Worker at carbon black plant. Sunray, Texas, 1942. Reproduction from color slide. LC-USW361-842. LC-DIG-fsac-1a35446. FSA/OWI Collection. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Quoted passages from *John Vachon's America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II*, by John Vachon and Miles Orvell, online courtesy Google Books.

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