



*Where there is perhaps a province
in which the photograph can tell us nothing more
than what we see with our own eyes,
there is another in which it proves to us how little
our eyes permit us to see.*

Dorothea Lange

A victim of polio before she turned eight, Dorothea Lange walked with a limp most of her life. Born on the 26th of May, in 1895, she was a minimally trained photographer whose work captured the life of people living in very difficult times.

When she was a girl, Dorothea spent much of her time walking around the streets of New York City. She would collect pictures, during these wanderings, which may have sparked her interest in photography. She referred to these activities as “acting like a photographer observer.”

She may not have realized then that she was developing a particularly important skill she would use later. Her “cloak of invisibility,” as she called it, allowed her to get close to her subjects, even though she was approaching them with her camera.

Although she studied to become a teacher, that was not her life’s passion—it was her parents’ request. One of the jobs she had, to support herself during that time, was to restore photos for a local photography shop. It led to a career change for her when an employee left unexpectedly and Dorothea was sent to replace him.

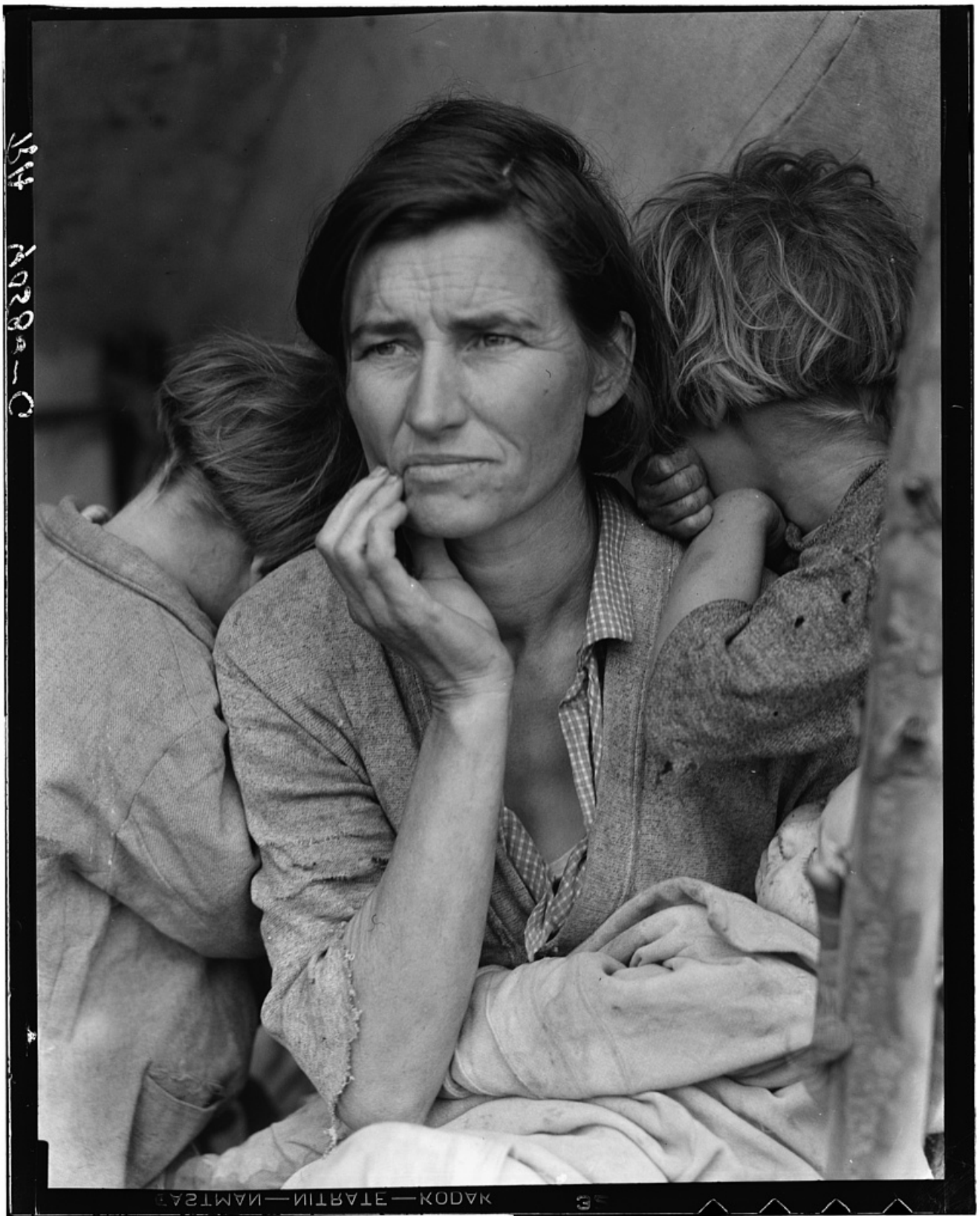
From working as a studio photographer to working for herself, Dorothea decided to open a portrait studio in San Francisco. This put her “out west” when the Great Depression descended on America.

As she did when she was a girl, Dorothea walked the streets of the city wearing her “cloak of invisibility.” She began to photograph those whom the depression hit the hardest—people who had become poor and homeless. One of her most-famous photos, from that period of her life, is 1933's “[White Angel Breadline](#).”

In 1934, the federal government’s Resettlement Administration (later called the Farm Security Administration) hired Dorothea to document how the Depression was impacting people. Traveling from place to place, Lange photographed migrant workers, urban slums and homeless shelters.

Her “cloak of invisibility,” of course, never made Dorothea invisible to anyone. It was just something about Lange which caused her subjects to let her into their personal space.

One of her most-famous photos is called “Migrant Mother.” The picture of a woman, grown older than her years, depicts the times of hardship which so many depression-era Americans faced.



During World War II, the federal government called-on Dorothea again. This time, working for the War Relocation Authority, she photographed Japanese-Americans forced to leave their homes, and abandon their businesses, to live in internment camps.

After the war, and following a *LIFE* Magazine collaboration with Ansel Adams—in which the two famous photographers documented a Mormon Community—Dorothea went to Ireland. She felt very connected both to the people and to the land:

I saw a dark figure approaching... and as he passed, he was pure Ireland, he was just made out of that wet, limey soil.

Lange died of cancer on the 11th of October, 1965. Her pictures still resonate, helping us to understand not just the hardships of a bygone era but to see how our faces so often reflect our most deeply held personal emotions.

The photo at the top of this page depicts Dorothea, working in California for the Resettlement Administration, during February of 1936.

Click on the image for a much-better view.

Credits:

Image, described above, [online via the Library of Congress](#).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Dorothea-Lange-American-Photographer>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Dorothea-Lange-American-Photographer>

Media Stream

Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange

Dorothea Lange took one of her most-famous photographs during February or March of 1936. The photo depicts 32-year-old Florence Owens Thompson, a widowed mother of numerous children, whose life had been upended by the effects of America's Great Depression.

At the time she took the photograph, Lange was working for the U.S. government's Resettlement Administration. Her job, among other things, was to document the lives of people who were enduring the effects of a terrible economy.

The Library of Congress maintains [the original photo](#):

Migrant Mother

Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.

Photograph shows Florence Thompson with three of her children in a photograph known as "Migrant Mother."

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