

# IMAGE OF AN ERA

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In March 1936, U.S. Resettlement Administration photographer Dorothea Lange made this portrait of a migrant crop picker in Nipomo, California. She and her children were barely getting by after the double whammy of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression and then migrating west from Oklahoma.

The photo, titled “Migrant Mother,” became an icon — not just of its era but of documentary visual journalism. It would be first published in the San Francisco News on March 11, 1936 — 90 years ago.

## ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC PHOTOS IN U.S. HISTORY

Photojournalist Dorothea Lange was working for the federal government’s Resettlement Administration, documenting the conditions struggling farmworkers were dealing with in March 1936.

A series of dust storms had struck the American Great Plains, demolishing farms and putting farmworkers and sharecroppers out of business. Many of them would head west to California. John Steinbeck would write about these migrant workers in “The Grapes of Wrath” in 1939.

But even in California, migrant farmworkers continued to experience hard times. In Nipomo, California, 175 miles north of Los Angeles, bad weather had destroyed the local pea crop. That’s where Lange found an idle picker sitting in a makeshift tent, surrounded by her seven children.

Lange quoted the woman as saying, “We just existed. We survived. Let’s put it that way.”

“I did not ask her name or her history,” Lange said. “She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that (she and her children) had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields and birds that the children had killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food.”

Lange made six photos of the woman. She holds a baby while her other children cower around



her and she casts an empty gaze into the distance.

The San Francisco News published two photos of the series on March 10, 1936. It then published the one shown here — which became known as “Migrant Mother” — the next day.

Since Lange was working on a government payroll, the work she shot that day was in the public domain — meaning other outlets could publish it at will. The photo, reproduced time and time again, is still used today to represent Depression-era hardships experienced by Americans.

In 1978, a reporter for the Modesto Bee tracked down the woman in the famous photo: Florence Owens Thompson. She said Lange had promised her she would stay anonymous, to spare her children embarrassment.

She had been born in 1903 as a full Cherokee in Oklahoma, and, at age 17, had married and moved to California for farm work. In 1931 — when she was 28 and pregnant with her sixth child — her husband died of tuberculosis.

After that, she had worked odd jobs to feed her kids. In 1945, she found work in a hospital and tended bar at night. This was despite having one of the most famous faces in the country.

Thompson died in 1983 at age 80.



Lange began her session by shooting two photos from farther away. At left is Thompson’s 12-year-old daughter who doesn’t appear in many of the other pictures.



Lange moved in closer for her last four shots. In two of them, Thompson is nursing her infant. One big take-away from this photo: Kids haven’t changed much since 1936, have they?



This one is much better. This photo and the one at far left were published on page 3 of the San Francisco News on March 10, 1936. “Migrant Mother” was published the next day.

## GIVING A THUMBS-UP



The version of “Migrant Mother” most of us have seen is the one at the top of this page. However, that is a retouched version.

In 1939, Lange decided she was bothered by the mother’s thumb in the extreme lower right of the original 1936 photo, just below her baby’s face.

The thumb is slightly

blurred because it was too close to the lens to be in focus. Lange had her assistant remove the thumb on the negative — Photoshop, of course, wouldn’t be available for another half-century.

It wasn’t even the first time the photo had been doctored. The New York Times removed the thumb when it ran “Migrant Mother” in July 1936.

## A MASTER DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER

Lange was working for one of the many New Deal agencies that was created after Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office: the Resettlement Administration. That agency would later be folded into the Farm Security Administration.

Lange and other photographers were hired to document the plight of American farmworkers. The agency collected nearly 80,000 photographs between 1935 and 1944.

In fact, this was why Thompson had agreed to be photographed in the first place: Lange explained the photos would see wide use and would help educate the public about what was happening to them.

Lange had been born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895. She had contracted polio at age 7 that left her with a permanent limp. Five years later, her father abandoned the family. Her mother was left to



Dorothea Lange working atop her automobile in 1936.

raise Lange and her younger brother on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

She studied photography at Columbia University and later moved to San Francisco, where she worked in a camera shop and then opened a portrait studio. She turned to documentary work during the Great Depression.

Not only was “Migrant Mother” published in newspapers nationwide, it was featured in an art show at the Museum of Modern Art in December 1940. MoMA says, “It’s possible, even likely, that ‘Migrant Mother’ has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art more often than any other photograph in the Museum’s collection.”

Lange went on to photograph Japanese internment camps during World War II, she taught photography at the San Francisco Art Institute and she co-founded a photography magazine called Aperture.

Lange died of esophageal cancer in October 1965. She was 70.