

Dorothea Lange



An American documentary photographer whose dramatic portraits chronicled life in America and around the world.

Born Dorothea Margaretta Nutzhorn on May 26, 1895 in Hoboken, New Jersey to German-American parents, Johanna Lange and Heinrich Nutzhorn.

Dorothea and her brother grew up on Manhattan's Lower East Side where they attended school. She contracted polio at age seven, which left her right leg weakened and her foot disfigured, causing her to limp. By age twelve, her father abandoned the family. She later adopted her mother's surname, and so became Dorothea Lange.

As a young woman, Lange attended Columbia University in New York City, where she studied photography. Her aspiration to make a living as a photographer, led her to travel the world, eventually landing her in San Francisco, where she obtained work in a photography studio. In March 1920, she married the painter, Maynard Dixon, and had two sons, Daniel and John.

Her early photographs of unemployed men in dire circumstances on the streets of San Francisco, brought her immediate recognition. She was then commissioned by the Resettlement Administration to document migrant farmworkers. This turn of events was what eventually led to her photographing Florence Owens Thompson, creating the most widely recognized and reproduced image of the Great Depression, "Migrant Mother."

The Depression affected people around the world. In the United States, approximately 14 million were out of work, many homeless, hungry, and on the move. Prolonged drought and subsequent dust storms created what became known as the Dust Bowl in the midwest and southwestern part of the country. Unable to farm the land and hearing word of jobs in California, around 300,000 people migrated on foot, by rail, and in their worn out trucks and cars. It was this mass exodus into which Dorothea immersed herself, living with the migrant workers and roaming the long stretches of road, always with her camera.

She had divorced Dixon in 1935 and married Paul Schuster Taylor, professor of economics at UC Berkeley. Together, they traveled in California and the midwest, documenting poverty among the forgotten men, women, and children, especially sharecroppers.

In March of 1936, Lange arrived in Nipomo, California. A sign for a pea-picker's camp pointed down Oakglen. At first, she passed it by, but then returned, encountering a 32-year-old mother and her

children. Lange was drawn to Florence Thompson and took several pictures of her at the camp, seated in their tent. Florence had come to Nipomo with Jim Hill when their car overheated. While he saw to the repairs, Lange happened upon Florence and her five children and photographed them. With crops frozen, there was no work. Lange's published photos brought attention to the camp and food rations were delivered to the thousands of destitute pickers the next day.

In 1941, Lange was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, but gave it up for an assignment by the War Relocation Authority. She documented the relocation of Japanese-Americans into internment camps in California. In 1945, she taught at the California School of Fine Arts. She co-founded the photography magazine, "Aperture" in 1952. Her work continued, photographing Mormons in Utah and the destruction of a town when Lake Berryessa was created in Napa County, California.

Lange suffered from what was later called post-polio syndrome. On October 11, 1965 in San Francisco, California, she died of cancer at age seventy, shortly before an exhibition of her work was to open at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She had traveled the world, photographing countries in Asia, the Middle East, and South America. The clearly identifiable, storytelling quality of her photographs made her both a celebrated and a controversial figure. While she was recognized for her artistic talent, it was social justice that drove Dorothea Lange to document sadly unfortunate periods in American and world history.

Dorothea Lange Elementary School in Nipomo, California was named in her honor.

note: photograph by Rondal Partridge, 1936;
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