

Project Title: Not To Inform Us, But to Move Us: the Farm Security Agency photos revisited
Countries Where Project Will Take Place: United States
Nominating College: Occidental College
Project Leader: Leo Blain, Occidental College, United States

Context and Project Overview

With the Davis project grant I intend to revisit and rephotograph four sites covered by the Farm Security Agency's (FSA) photography program. Today, the same communities that demanded the attention of FSA photographers 80 years ago face issues of economic and environmental violence that are remarkably similar to those of the 1930's and 40's. This will be both a project of photographic documentation and a visual comparative study of how America's most vulnerable communities have been changed across decades by issues that have remained persistent. My photographs of each site will be accompanied by four essays that compare the economic and environmental challenges of the communities I intend to visit across decades, their causes, and the enduring impact they have had on each community in question. I will give special consideration to what may have been left out in the original process of documentation.

My process of research and revisitation will inform the creation of a website and outreach program for others to pursue similar processes of photographic revisitation in communities that matter to them. Like the FSA program, I believe there is an opportunity to engage communities in conversations about economic and environmental challenges and to create tools for local and national education and advocacy. After I have visited each site, I will build a website to house my photos and essays. This website will include a guide, based on my experiences, for other photographers and community members to conduct the same combination of photography and research at sites covered by the FSA. By opening the process of revisitation to others, this project will build a community of photographers and researchers that will lend it longevity and reach far beyond what I could achieve on my own.

As a creative person who has practiced photography since I was 14 and the product of a union family whose parents emphasized a strong commitment to economic justice, the FSA photography program epitomizes for me the power of the arts to drive social change. Between 1935 and 1944 the FSA directed a team of photographers whose 175,000 images of economic and environmental hardship constitute an unparalleled portrait of many of America's most threatened communities. Initially conceived to justify the massive federal spending in the New Deal, the program's mission was well-captured by its motto: "not to inform us, but to move us."

The same issues that the FSA photographers documented still exist today and they largely play out in the same locations that served as backdrops in the 1930's and 40's. In the 80 years since, little has changed aside from the people. Instead of migrant farmworkers from Europe, migrant farmworkers from South and Central America suffer this country's worst economic violence. The southern U.S. still floods and farmers are desperate for water in the desert west today just as they were at the height of the dust bowl. The precision of the FSA's photography program served as a warning, for its images show us that the economic and environmental violence that demanded historic intervention some 80 years ago still exists acutely today. Migration, environmental change, resource depletion—none of these issues are new, however contemporary they may seem.

The four sites I have chosen to revisit: central Los Angeles, Shenandoah National Park, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and Brookwood Alabama—are all prime examples of FSA sites that still contend with the same challenges they faced in the 1930's and 40's. Dorothea Lange's photographs of central Los Angeles focus on the ever-pressing issue of housing. Arthur Rothstein's photographs of Shenandoah National Park, (created in 1935 just a year prior to Rothstein's visit), captured the challenge of preservation at the cost of the communities that lived in the park. Today, tourist congestion and coal and oil plants in the area have rendered Shenandoah the second most polluted National Park in the country

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and created new economic and environmental strain on nearby communities. John Vachon's images of the Upper Peninsula show the challenges industrialization created for communities long-embedded in Northern Michigan's old growth forests and cranberry bogs. Now, Michiganders who are desperate for family sustaining work and committed to the preservation of the natural beauty of their home are set against each other by the economic opportunity promised by resource extraction. And in 1930's Brookwood Alabama, Arthur Rothstein photographed striking coal miners who could easily pass for the locked out workers on the Warrior Met Coal picket line that has held for the last 20 months in the same coalfield.

A cursory search through the Library of Congress FSA Photography collection reveals that nearly every site covered by the program faces similar issues in the present day. As intrigued as I am by the prospect of criss-crossing the United States to faithfully re-cover all of these sites, I have neither the time nor the community ties to deliver the results such a project would demand. In order to make the first phase of this project manageable, I have chosen four sites that not only bear significant similarities in terms of economic and environmental challenges between past and present but are also important to my personal conceptions of economic and environmental justice. Los Angeles and the Upper Peninsula have both been homes to me. Shenandoah is where I hiked as a youth and later worked as a backpacking guide; its mountains, creeks, farms and waterfalls taught me to love the outdoors. And, as a child of union organizers, Warrior Met, one of the longest ongoing strikes in the country, represents the union communities that reinforced in my mind the importance of workers' rights in the pursuit of economic justice and peace.

The website I will create to house this project will feature a rotating gallery of select images on the home page above a map with location tags for each FSA photography site. Clicking on a location tag will bring visitors to a page for that site that includes a selection of original FSA photographs as well the present-day photographs taken by myself or another photographer. Each of these pages will also include written content on the location in question that includes analysis of what may have been left out in the original coverage, the impact of the issues that have remained most persistent and the photographer's reflection on the process. If a site has not been covered, clicking on its location tag will bring visitors to a page with instructions on how to get involved with the project. A "get involved" banner at the top of the home screen will take visitors to the same page.

Definition of Peace

This project is driven by my interests in photography, peace, and community-building that have been informed by a dichotomous religious background. Although I am not a Quaker—I was raised Jewish—I spent a great deal of time in Quaker communities growing up. My experience with Quaker worship and the religion's peace testimony has been instrumental in how I understand peace and pacifism. For both Quakers and Jews, the act of speaking out is held in high regard. When faced with struggle, Jews are taught "not to curse the darkness, but to strike a match." The worship practice of Quakers is guided by a similar thought: as Quakers do not have clergy, any member of a Quaker meeting can deliver vocal ministry by speaking out during silent worship. My religious communities have led me to define peace not as a search for tranquility but rather an aspiration to speak out on behalf of—or when necessary, against—one's community. This aspiration guides how I interact with the world and has led me to consider photography as a way to speak out of the silence and point a critical lens at the people and places I care about.

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When the FSA photography program ended in 1944, America lost one of its most incisive artistic voices on behalf of communities that face economic and environmental change. We also lost one of the best means to drive a public agenda on behalf of these communities. I intend for this project to create the kind of narratives that speak loudly enough to connect issues and conversations from the past to the present and encourage the kind of community engagement that fosters transformative social change.

Affiliation

This project will be assisted by the Labor Network for Sustainability (LNS), an economic and environmental justice research and policy center where I worked between 2019 and 2022. While at LNS, one of my main tasks was to conduct interviews for the Just Transition Listening Project which interviewed over a hundred people on the frontlines of economic and environmental transition in the United States. This project gave me the community-focused research skills I will apply in this project and led me to develop personal and professional connections with interviewees in each of the communities I plan to visit. My former interviewees will serve as first points of contact for my inquiry into each of the sites I chose. I will use a “snowball sampling” method in which initial contacts in each community identify further photography subjects and points of investigation.

LNS Research and Policy Director and labor historian, Jeremy Brecher will advise my research methodology. His expertise as the author of the labor history book *Strike!*, which included FSA photographs in its analysis of the American labor movement will help guide the research element of this project. LNS founder and current US Climate Action Network board member Joe Uehlein will help to provide further connections to contacts in my target communities. LNS will also provide social media support to publicize this project and facilitate outreach to the photographers and researchers whose participation will lend this project reach and longevity once I complete my initial coverage and build out a website.

I will rely on Occidental College professors Amy Lyford, who taught my History of Photography class, and David Weldzius, who teaches a Social Documentary Photography class I am currently enrolled in, for guidance on the composition and presentation of my photos.