

Born of a “New Deal”

Some of the most memorable documentary images are possibly the first ones ever made

by Larry L. Levin

Modern, documentary photography is the accidental spawn of a depression era “New Deal” public relations program within the Department of Agriculture. The midwife was a university professor and government bureaucrat named Roy Emerson Stryker, who joined government through a circuitous and unlikely route.

That route began with the 1929 stock market crash, which spiraled downward into The Great Depression. In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) was inaugurated president. Immediately after taking office, FDR gathered the best and brightest of his generation into a “kitchen cabinet” to informally advise him in combating the ongoing economic collapse. One kitchen cabinet member, Rexford Tugwell—formerly chair of the Economics Department at Columbia University—was appointed to run what became the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm Security Administration (FSA).

The FSA was responsible for providing support to rural relief efforts, but it faced intense competition for scarce tax dollars. Tugwell soon realized his eventual success in obtaining appropriations for the rural areas depended on his ability to graphically illustrate the depth of the need to Congress and the public at large.

Roy Stryker—a popular economics instructor from Columbia and a protégé to Tugwell—had previously shown a talent for illustrating difficult concepts through graphics and photography. Even though he was not a photographer himself, he understood photography’s communicative power. Tugwell brought Stryker in to manage the FSA’s public relations project.

As soon as the images Stryker had commissioned in his first tentative efforts were displayed, they helped to persuade the public that government action was needed. His original budget increased enough that he was able to hire more photographers to document affected areas more fully.

Stryker’s vision for the program went beyond its use as a simple public relations/appropriations tool. He saw it as an opportunity to show “America to America.” In his mind’s

eye, he knew the images could be used to inform, educate and show Americans their common bonds, culture and passion.

Under Stryker’s direction, the photographers became storytellers. They made indelible images that showed the hardships of the people. They illustrated hunger, unemployment and natural disasters, but most movingly, they showed the faces of the poor. The pictures became the spear point in a crusade to force change. This purpose was served through government programs and private charity and as a side benefit, an invaluable document was created that froze the American lifestyle at a moment in history.

Coincidentally, this happened at a point in time when the boundaries of the photographic art were expanding and allowing for greater flexibility. Cameras and lenses were improving. Film was getting faster and more versatile. A few exceptional professional photographers took the technical advances and used their own artistic abilities to turn the photograph into an important, historical, documentary art form.

The driving force behind the transition to documentary art was the fellow driving the train and the FSA History Section,

Roy Stryker. Stryker’s economist boss Rexford Tugwell defined the mission: “Roy, a man may have holes in his shoes, and you may see the holes when you take the picture. But maybe your sense of the human being will teach you there’s a lot more to that man than the holes in his shoes, and you ought to try and get that idea across.”

The project succeeded and exceeded its original charge through Stryker’s devotion to the power of photography and his skills as a manager. Stryker explained complex subjects in a way that was universally understood. He challenged his photographers to learn and understand their subjects. Stryker insisted that a photographer learn as much as possible about a subject before photographing it, and he assigned long lists of books and prepared suggestions for possible pictures which he called “shooting scripts.”

When Stryker assigned Carl Mydans to document “cotton in the south,” for example,



Photograph by Russell Lee: Library of Congress File #LC-USF34-033705-D.

Belongings of migrant family packed in and around their car near Muskogee, Oklahoma, June 1939.



Photograph courtesy Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville

Roy Stryker on boat.



Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott: Library of Congress File #LC-USF346- 050720-E-Bt

Negro children and old home on badly eroded land near Wadesboro, North Carolina, December 1938.

he asked Mydans what he knew about cotton. When Mydans replied, “Nothing,” Stryker insisted on putting the photographer through a seminar that ensured Mydans understood the history, economics and political ramifications before Stryker let him out the door. Thus prepared, Mydans told a more informed story. Mydans later remembered Stryker by saying, “He doesn’t know how to take a picture, but he taught us what should be in a good picture.”

In describing Stryker, photographer Arthur Rothstein said his “integrity and energetic dedication helped to maintain high technical and aesthetic standards.” Jack Delano remembers Stryker’s “enthusiasm and love for detail and the deeper meaning of everything American was something he must have transmitted to everybody. He certainly did to me.”

The FSA History Section collected some 200,000 iconic images over its eight-year life span. They now reside permanently in the Library of Congress—Roy Stryker’s legacy. The images have appeared in thousands of publications and projects.

Among the best known images are Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” Arthur Rothstein’s “Dust Bowl,” and Gordon Park’s “Char Woman,” but a number of other fine photographers contributed to the collection. Included are Esther Bubley, Paul Carter, John Collier Jr., Marjory Collins, Jack Delano, Walker Evans, Theodore Jung, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Edwin Rosskam, Ben Shahn, Arthur Siegel, John Vachon and Marion Post Wolcott.

Stryker was both a photo editor and a bureaucrat. The early enthusiasm on the part of funders in Congress evaporated when the images reflected the true state of affairs in individual districts. Pressure to curtail funding followed. Always on Capitol Hill, Stryker found ways to keep his project going. He was able to shift photographers to other departments and juggle work schedules and staffing when funds were low.

Stryker was a facilitator. He could provide necessary equipment and supplies, unravel bureaucratic red tape, assist with details and information, and secure extra monies for travel. Walker Evans said “If you really examine what Stryker did leading this project you realized Stryker was one incredible manager.”

According to Ben Shahn, “Roy was just another bureaucrat to me, but I realized very soon that without Roy this thing would have died. He made it possible for us to go out in the field, to be protected completely by him, and for this I am grateful.”

Stryker deflected the frequent controversies caused by the photos. When Rothstein’s famous image of a steer’s skull on parched land in South Dakota was criticized for being staged, Stryker questioned Rothstein. In fact, he had moved the skull to improve the shot’s composition—ten feet.

“What the hell,” exclaimed Stryker? “The point of the picture is that there’s a drought. Cattle are dying. And don’t tell me that the photographer got out of the drought area by moving that skull ten feet.” Afterwards, no one dared question the validity of the FSA pictures.



Roadside stand near Birmingham; Alabama, 1936.

Photograph by Walker Evans: Library of Congress File #LC-USF342-008253.

Dorothea Lange remembered that Roy was “a colossal watchdog for his people. If you were on that staff, you were one of his people. His particular genius is something you can’t write specifications for. The people who worked for him could not help being loyal to him.”

“What we ended up with was as well-rounded a picture of American Life during that period as anyone could get. Pictures that were used were mostly pictures of the dust bowl and migrant and half-starved cattle. But probably half of the file contained positive pictures, the kind that give the heart a tug.”
—Roy Emerson Stryker

Stryker’s aggressive personal style could not avoid making enemies of competing interests. By 1943, a coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats created enough pressure in Congress to merge FSA staff and images under the Office of War Information. Stryker saw the handwriting on the wall. There was no place for him in this new structure.

Congress wanted to destroy some of the images. The Associated Press, afraid of the competition from the FSA Library, wanted the collection destroyed. There was one last battle to be won. With assistance from Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish and elements within the White House, Franklin Roosevelt was induced to sign an executive order consigning the FSA collection to the Library of Congress for the use of future generations.

Roy Stryker left government and went to work in industry using what he had learned from the FSA experience to produce exceptional documentary images. He died in Grand Junction, Colorado in 1975.

Stryker’s passing left us with a number of lingering questions. In today’s environment, are there photo editors, managers, directors to help photographers do a better job? Who motivates, facilitates, negotiates, cajoles, consoles, inspires, “takes the heat,” and befriends the shooter? Who is there to serve as buffer between management and photojournalist? Sadly, the answer may be no one, but study of Stryker’s singular successes and management style should certainly be included in the training afforded each budding photojournalist. Our real hope may be that a new “Stryker” will appear when absolutely needed.

“My passion for photography stems from a very simple thing—man’s ability to communicate with his fellow man. The better the means of communication become the more mankind will benefit. It is through the exchange of information and ideas that we get better understanding and sympathy of the other fellow and his problems. The more we have such understanding and sympathy the more the world and man will progress. I believe the camera can make an important contribution toward this end.”—Roy Emerson Stryker

Freelance photographer Laurence Levin and producer/editor Justin Schauble have produced a documentary DVD on Stryker’s America, which is the featured cover selection on the 2008 Films for the Humanities & Sciences Spring Catalog. Films for the Humanities & Sciences is the nation’s leading distributor of educational media to libraries and higher education. Stryker’s America is available exclusively from Films for the Humanities, website: www.films.com, phone: 800-257-5126.