

Name: _____

Class: _____

Seeing Through Dorothea's Eyes

By Sudipta Bardhan

2016

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) was an American documentary photographer and photojournalist. She was most well-known for taking photos during the Great Depression, a time in America during the 1930s when people struggled to find work and make money. As you read, take notes on what Lange took photographs of throughout her career.

- [1] Every day after school, Dorothea Lange walked through the streets of downtown Manhattan, heading for the library where her mother worked. She moved so quietly that no one really noticed her at all. Dorothea didn't mind going unnoticed — it gave her a chance to see the things she wanted to see.

Dorothea had a hard childhood because she felt different from other people. She had a physical disability. When she was seven, the disease called polio¹ had left her with a limp. Also, when she was twelve, her father abandoned the family, leaving her mother to care and provide for them. Dorothea grew to be a solitary² child. She spent many hours alone, watching other people going about their lives.



"Even before she held a camera in her hands, Dorothea Lange captured pictures in her mind and heart." by Courtesy of the Library of Congress is used with permission.

A World Full of Images

Over time, Dorothea developed a special gift — she saw beauty in things that others didn't even notice. As she walked the streets of New York City, she discovered a world full of images. She saw poor immigrants³ struggling to make lives for themselves in America. She saw the homeless walking the same streets as the wealthy. Even before she held a camera in her hands,

1. an infectious disease that can cause nerve damage
2. **Solitary** (*adjective*) done or existing alone
3. **Immigrant** (*noun*) a person who comes to live in a foreign country

Dorothea captured these pictures in her mind and heart.

One of Dorothea's journeys led her to the door of Arnold Genthe, a portrait photographer.⁴ She didn't have much experience with photography, but in 1914, she convinced Genthe to make her his assistant. He taught her how to take portraits and work with cameras, studio lights, and negatives. She watched everything he did and soon became an accomplished photographer.

Photos Worth Taking

- [5] In 1919, camera in hand, Dorothea Lange traveled to San Francisco. She set up her own portrait studio and became successful photographing the rich and famous. Ten years later, when the Great Depression began, things changed for everyone, including Lange.

People all over the country lost their jobs. Businesses closed, and fewer people could afford Lange's portraits. Her business suffered, but she saw this as a mixed blessing. She realized that she wasn't very happy only creating portraits for pay.

Lange struggled to decide what to do next. She took a vacation to help her make a decision. Walking alone in the mountains, she remembered the pictures she had filed away in her heart from her childhood, of bustling⁵ markets and hard-working immigrants. Suddenly, she knew what to do.

"I had to take pictures and concentrate upon people, only people," she said. "All kinds of people, people who paid me and people who didn't."

Lange wandered the streets of San Francisco, just as she had done as a child in New York City. She watched people around her going about their lives. One day, she took a photo of people waiting in a bread line. She hung that photo in her studio with the portraits, and realized that it was more powerful than all of the work she had done before.

Struggles and Strength

- [10] The state of California soon hired Lange to photograph the living conditions of migrant farm workers.⁶ She traveled out of San Francisco to the camps where migrants from the Midwest came to try to find work. In one camp, she came across a woman and her family on the brink⁷ of starvation. "I saw and approached the hungry and desperate⁸ mother. She said that they had

4. a person who takes pictures of people, especially of people's faces
5. **Bustle (verb)** to move in an energetic or noisy manner
6. a worker who moves from place to place for seasonal work
7. on the edge

been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed.”

Lange was appalled⁹ by the way these families were living. She took photographs of the woman and her children, and of other people in the camp. When people saw those photographs, they were shocked as well. In fact, the federal government rushed 20,000 pounds of food to the workers in that camp, mainly because Lange had brought attention to them.

The pictures Dorothea Lange took during the Great Depression captured people’s despair and their hopelessness. But the photos also captured their pride and honor. She saw in these people a determination that even the Great Depression could not take away. Using her camera, Lange kept a record of people who would have otherwise been forgotten. When President Franklin Roosevelt began a program to help those people most affected by the Depression, Dorothea Lange’s photographs played an important role in bringing aid to many migrant workers.

Throughout her life, Lange believed that “a camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see.” She hung her camera around her neck almost every day. The pictures she made decades ago are still teaching us to see that beauty can always be found in the strength and determination of the human spirit.

All Highlights material is copyrighted by Highlights for Children, Inc., and/or various authors and illustrators. Any commercial use or distribution of material without permission is strictly prohibited. Please visit www.highlights.com for more information.

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

8. **Desperate** (*adjective*) very sad and upset because of having little or no hope
9. **Appalled** (*adjective*) affected by a strong feeling of shock and alarm