David Joseph Marcou has authored 103 books, including "The Peoples’ Champions”. He graduated La Crosse’s St. James and Aquinas Schools, UW-Madison (BA-1973), University of Iowa (MA-1978), and UM-Columbia (BJ-1984). He edited Adams-Friendship’s weeklies in 1990, and was La Crosse correspondent for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel 13 years. He taught adults writing and photography 11 years at Western Technical College. His works have twice been nominated for Pulitzers (including his play “Remembering Davy Crockett”), and twice nominated for POYi awards. Repositories housing his works include Wisconsin Historical Society, and La Crosse Public Library Archives, both including dedicated online galleries; many Smithsonian (SI) Archives; UK National Portrait Gallery; British Library; Library of Congress; and National Assembly Library of South Korea. His photos have been in many shows, including the SI National Museum of American History Archives Center’s 2011-2012 “Gift of the Artist” group-show curated by SI Archivist David Haberstich. David J. Marcou also has a large online gallery on the UK’s DPhotographer website. His son, Matt, an Army Special Ops Combat Medic veteran and now a nationally-recognized Engineering student, is married to Jessica Amarnek Marcou, a successful artist and university teacher.
**Interior Photos Section Captions-Credits:**

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- Woman and girl by Whites Only movie entrance, AL, ca. 1950s (GP).
- Gordon Parks Jr. (Courtesy of GP Sr.).
- Ingrid Bergman on set of “Stromboli”, ca. 1961 (GP).
- Red Jackson, Harlem gang leader, 1948 (GP).
- Ethel Shariff and her Muslim Sisters, Chicago, 1960s (GP).

Page 35:
- Louisiana Negress with hat and umbrella (DL-LOC).
- Malcolm X with headline, 1960s (GP).
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- GP cover photo about people of Harlem for “Life” magazine, March 1968 (Time-Life).

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- Camp Nathan Hale interracial program, Southfields, NY, 1943 (GP).
- Muhammad Ali hams it up for media, Miami, 1970 (GP Foundation).
- Japanese-American family ready to leave for Nisei Internment Camp, ca. 1942 (DL-WRA).
- Fort Scott, KS train station doors, 1950 (GP).
- Gordon Parks© with film director Spike Lee and basketball star Magic Johnson®, Jackie Robinson Foundation Dinner, 2002 (Courtesy of GP).
Photographic Equality: Dorothea Lange, Her Migrant Mother, and the Nisei Internees – Researched/Written by David Joseph Marcou.

“The cars of the migrant people crawled out of the side roads onto the great cross-country highway, and they took the migrant way to the West. In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water. And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they had all come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together, they shared their lives, their food and the things they hoped for in the new country.” John Steinbeck, “The Grapes of Wrath”, 1939.

Big things often emerge from small packages, and so it was with Dorothea Margaretta Nutzhorn’s life. Dorothea was born into a Lutheran family in the Jewish neighborhood of Hoboken, New Jersey, on May 25, 1895. Her father, Henry, an attorney, walked out on her mother, Joan, when Dorothea was 12. To survive, Joan worked in a New York City library, and later for the probation courts.

The child attended primary school, but would have skipped out endlessly, if she could, to walk the neighborhoods of life, and spend time in museums and galleries, viewing the art she so loved. Dorothea preferred visualizing life rather than writing it down, though her best field-notes in the 1930s were to be insight-driven and literate.

Dorothea’s ancestry was German, on both sides. Three brothers to her mother had been trained as lithographers in Germany, before they came to America. After Henry Nutzhorn absconded, Joan, Dorothea, and Dorothea’s younger brother, Henry Martin, would move in with Joan’s mother, Sophie Vottler. When Joan took the job with the probation courts, it required she visit the homes of those involved. Dorothea sometimes accompanied her mother. The experience would prove invaluable. Joan kept notes on her home visits, and Dorothea, it seems, read some of these. Walking with a limp wasn’t slowing Dorothea down enough to prevent her from wanting to see the world.
The limp derived from her bout with polio at age seven, which left her right leg partially paralyzed and wizened, principally from the knee down. She couldn’t flex the front of her foot for the rest of her life. Dorothea apparently never used trusses or braces, but did wear a right shoe a half size smaller than her left. Later, she spoke of her disability: “No one who hasn’t lived the life of a semi-cripple knows how much that means. I think it was perhaps the most important thing that happened to me. [It] formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, and humiliated me. All those things at once. I’ve never gotten over it and I am aware of the force and power of it.”

It is significant, too, that Dorothea Lange came to prominence during the time when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, an even more severe polio victim, rose to power. Neither would let their disability stand in the way of doing important work. Still, Dorothea was called “Limpy” by other children, while her mother always said, “Now walk as well as you can!” The daughter grew bitter against her mother, as a result, but learned to bide her time sufficiently and began making her way in New York City. She always wore long dresses or slacks, though, to conceal her disfigurement.

Dorothea’s camera would also become part of the things that were second-nature to her. She said: “You put your camera around your neck in the morning, along with putting on your shoes, and there it is, an appendage of the body that shares your life with you.”

For high school, Dorothea’s mother arranged to send her to Wadleigh, for girls, in Manhattan by stating their residence was in New York City, not New Jersey, where it actually was. At Wadleigh, Dorothea’s progress was helped by a teacher who upgraded her student’s paper crucially once, when she’d done abysmally, so she could finish school there. When Dorothea graduated, Joan asked her what she wanted to be. “I want to be a photographer,” she said.

EXPANDING CONTACTS

After graduation, Dorothea studied at a Teachers’ College, because her mother said she needed something to fall back on, if becoming a photographer didn’t work. However, she longed to take pictures and soon found teaching wasn’t for her. She next studied photography, with Clarence White, a notable pictorialist, portraitist,
and chiaroscuro specialist at Columbia College, known for his deft, delicate people photos; and she apprenticed under several photographers, including Arnold Genthe, who had famously photographed the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and had later come to New York, where he established his studio. Among Genthe’s sitters were Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, as well as John D. Rockefeller and Greta Garbo.

In 1918, Dorothea felt ready to travel, photographing as she went. She and friend Florence Ahlstrom set out on a world-tour, but when they reached San Francisco, their money was stolen and they had to find work immediately. Dorothea got a job at Marsh & Company, whose business included cheap photo-finishing. Then, in 1919, the divorce between Dorothea’s parents went through, and Joan retook her maiden name; Dorothea converted her last name to “Lange”, too, utilizing it the rest of her life.

One of the first people Dorothea Lange met at Marsh’s was artist Roi Partridge, who was married to photographer Imogen Cunningham. With expanding contacts, Dorothea soon set up her own portrait studio, and her clients included some of the best-connected families in the area. Cunningham, a close friend of Lange’s, would later become part of the famed f/64 group of photographers, which would begin in 1932, and which got its name from the smallest aperture on a camera, yielding the fullest depth of field. Other members included Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Dorothea never joined f/64. However, she was a friend of many in the group, including Adams, whom she periodically relied on for his superb print-making from her negatives.

In 1920, Lange married Maynard Dixon, a talented western artist. They had two sons, Daniel and John. However, Dorothea was not a stay-at-home mom, and in a pattern that would repeat itself often over the years, friends and family were enlisted as “foster-parents” for the children. Maynard and Dorothea pursued their art primarily, with Dorothea sometimes accompanying Dixon on his trips into other western states. Her tight close-up of the face of a Hopi Indian is a notable Lange photo from this period.
The Wall Street crash occurred in October 1929, and by 1932, Lange’s studio began faltering badly, due to the depressed economy. Dorothea began venturing onto San Francisco's streets more regularly with her camera.

THE START OF SOMETHING BIG

In 1932, during the depth of the Depression, when 14 million work-eligible Americans were without work, Dorothea became aware of the discrepancy between her formal portraits and what was going on in the streets. She knew her strength in photography was taking pictures of people and so it was that she began shooting San Francisco street life.

A rich woman called the “White Angel” had set up a bread line nearby, and Dorothea had finally decided to photograph it, taking along her brother for protection. As it turned out, even unemployed people took to her sufficiently, so she could photograph without objection. It was the streets, nevertheless, and there would still be shocks and intrusions occasionally.

On that first day, when she’d made her decision and gone to the White Angel Bread Line, she took one of her best-known photos. It could have been lost forever, though, but for some good fortune. Dorothea had made 12 exposures on her 3-1/4” X 4-1/4” Graflex, three of them of the bread line. When she got home, she removed her sheet-film from the camera’s film holder, handing the holder to her assistant, Roger Sturtevant, for reloading later.

The next day, Sturtevant took the holder into the darkroom and, with the light out luckily, reached in and found a film not yet pulled out. He put it in the box and developed it. It was the picture Lange would call “White Angel Bread Line,” showing an older man in hat with his cup, leaning against a fence facing the photographer, his back to the other men waiting for food.

“I can only say I knew I was looking at something,” Lange said of taking the Bread Line photo. “You know there are moments such as these when time stands still and all you do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you./ Sometimes you have an inner sense that you have encompassed the thing generally. You know then that you are not taking anything away from anyone: their privacy, their dignity, their wholeness.”
When her portrait customers saw the photo, they asked her what she’d been doing photographing “that”. But Dorothea knew taking the photo was the right thing to do. She had not only made a great street portrait, but she’d also provided “the context of the lives of the people in it,” according to writer George P. Elliott. In other words, Dorothea Lange had photographed people of interest, composing and using the lighting to tell a human story, in the subject’s natural environment. It was the start of something big.

The next year, 1934, Lange met Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist from Iowa, who was educated at UW-Madison and taught at the University of California. She did some work for him, and they soon fell in love. In 1935, she was amicably divorced from Maynard Dixon, as was Taylor from his wife, and the couple married. Taylor had three children from his former marriage, and Lange two, so their new family became a total of seven.

ROYSTRYKER AND THE FSA PHOTOGRAPHERS

One of Paul Taylor’s jobs was as part-time consultant to the State Emergency Relief Administration of California. Since photographers were not widely employed in his work, his office manager, Lawrence Hewes, Jr., broke the rules, hiring Lange at $1,560 a year as a “clerk-stenographer”, to use her photos.

Then in mid-1935, Dorothea was hired by Roy Emerson Stryker, who had himself been hired for the vague Historical Section Chief job in the US Resettlement Administration (RA), created by FDR’s Executive Order of April 30th, 1935. That executive order subsumed a number of programs, including one that moved sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and other poor farmers to subsistence farms held in-common. The Resettlement Administration was subsumed by the Farm Security Administration, in the Department of Agriculture. The Farm Security Administration, or FSA, was to become one of the most important agencies in the employment of photographers then.

Although he himself had hired her, Roy Stryker wasn’t immediately impressed by Lange’s photos. Because she was part of the same organization that included talented photographers Walker Evans, John Vachon, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, the Rosskham (Edwin and Louise), Jack Delano, Carl Mydans, Esther Bubley, Marion Post Walcott, and, eventually, Gordon Parks, it took time
before the hard-driving Stryker admitted Dorothea “had the most sensitivity and the most rapport with people” of all his photographers. The photographers assigned to the RA, and later to the FSA, photographed all over the United States, documenting chronic rural problems especially, including land-erosion and poverty. Their photos were sent to publishers, free-of-charge, to suggest how to uplift the poor, including people thrown out of their homes by bank foreclosures, etc., and forced to migrate cross-country, before there was anything like a sophisticated Interstate Highway System. Roads were often unpaved, and towns few and far between.

Lange was assigned mainly to California, though she’d travel tens of thousands of miles, including visits to Washington, D.C. The issue of who should retain her negatives struck closely to Lange, who wanted to utilize prints in California, and save time and the risk of losing images, by having her own printers do the work, and then send prints to Stryker, too. She also feared the deterioration of her films due to bad weather. Stryker balked; a tentative truce allowed negatives and prints to be sent back and forth, as needed at both ends.

One thing Lange and others feared was Stryker’s ill-treatment of negatives. Often he’d punch two holes in negatives he rejected, and as any self-respecting photographer knows, you generally don’t destroy negatives. Dorothea hinted to Stryker they should meet to discuss issues. Stryker said he couldn’t travel to California, but would try to answer her letters more promptly. Whether Stryker agreed fully or not, Lange would generally develop her films in Berkeley. She would then make three prints of each photo and forward them and relevant negatives to him. He would then return one print of each photo to her, so she could keep control of her lab. At least Lange would know immediately what her negatives contained. And maybe she kept a copy of her top images from the start.

Another issue was criticism from conservatives that the Roosevelt administration was too left wing, and that, they said, was especially true of FSA photographers, whom they called propagandists. That label didn’t bother Lange; she said that when it’s done with feeling and has a social purpose, everything is propaganda. The conservatives suggested liberals were attacking rich land-owners and banks with propaganda, thus adversely affecting American livelihoods.
During the same trip as Arthur Rothstein photographed a Cimerron County farmer and his two sons in Oklahoma, which made the Oklahoma Panhandle the symbol of the Dustbowl, the “Fargo Forum” broke a story that said a photo taken by Rothstein, of a steer's skull in the South Dakota Badlands, had been moved by the photographer onto a dry riverbed, and thus, faked, to prove drought and erosion were destroying American farms. Rothstein suggested he moved the skull only a few feet, and simply to take better pictures, aesthetically, but critics, already outraged by FDR’s deficit spending and social welfare programs, quickly latched onto an otherwise non-issue, making it a hot issue instead.

THE PEA-PICKER’S CAMP

In February 1936, Stryker wired approval to Lange for a one-month field trip to Southern California. The field trip completed, Dorothea was driving home, the weather cold and miserable. “It was raining, the camera bags were packed, and I had on the seat beside me in the car the results of my long trip,” said Lange. “Sixty-five miles an hour for seven hours would get me home to my family that night, and my eyes were glued to the wet and gleaming highway that stretched out ahead.

“I was on my way and barely saw a crude sign with pointing arrow which flashed by at the side of the road, saying PEA-PICKERS CAMP ... I didn’t want to stop, and didn’t.” Then, accompanied by the rhythmic beat of the windshield wipers, arose an inner argument: “Dorothea, how about that camp back there? What is the situation back there?”

“Are you going back?”

“Nobody could ask this of you, now could they?...”

“Having convinced myself for 20 miles that I could continue on, I did the opposite. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I made a U-turn on the empty highway. I went back those 20 miles and turned off the highway at that sign, PEA-PICKERS CAMP.”

The rest is history. Though the family in the now-famous Migrant Mother sequence looks very much down on their luck, there’s also strength in the mother’s face, of a much-put-upon, but still resilient sort. After Lange had made six
exposures of the mother and her children, her iconic photo would be published worldwide and still is the standard for early photographic portrayals of a single mother.

Almost immediately, the photograph would prompt relief assistance, which didn’t directly help the Thompson family – Florence Owens Thompson was the iconic mother, and she and her family departed the area promptly after Lange was there. Lange was later unsure about what she’d said to the mother to assuage any fear she might have had about the family’s being photographed. However, Dorothea did state: “There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.”

“The pea crop at Nipomo had frozen and there was no work for anybody. But I did not approach the tents and shelters of other stranded pea-pickers. It was not necessary; I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment.”

Roy Stryker recalled what that photo meant to the FSA program and to the country, nearly 35 years later in an interview with his biographer, Nancy Wood: “When Dorothea took that picture, that was the ultimate. She never surpassed it,” said Stryker. “To me, it was the picture of Farm Security. The others were marvelous but that was special. / “People would say to me, that migrant woman looks posed and I’d say she does not look posed. That picture is as uninvolved with the camera as any picture I’ve ever seen,” Stryker added.

The first time the “Migrant Mother” photo was published was in Survey Graphic’s September 1936 issue. Other photographs from the Nipomo sequence were published in the San Francisco News as early as March 10th and 11th, 1936, and resulted in aid being sent to the pea-pickers camp at Nipomo.

The first time “Migrant Mother” was shown in a gallery was at the first exhibit of the Museum of Modern Art’s new Department of Photography, in 1941. Countless publications and exhibits followed. George P. Elliott’s commentary hits the mark: “Most of Lange’s pictures are of people, and usually the center of interest is a face expressing troubled emotion. Her temptation is to sentimentalize these subjects about whom her feelings are so warm. / “But in her frequent successes, she redeems these pictures from sentimentality by the honesty and clarity of her seeing. Her vision leads to our warm understanding … ‘Migrant Mother’ centres on a
manifestly decent woman whose face is ravaged by immediate worry … She is poor, and we assume that her poverty and the uncertainty of her future cause her worry. But the viewer is less concerned with her poverty as such, and far, far less with feeling guilty about the social conditions that imposed poverty upon her, than … with understanding the profounder, the humanly universal, results of that poverty./ “For the picture is a sort of anti-Madonna and Child,” wrote Elliott. “One sees on her lap part of a sleeping, dirty baby; but the mother, who, we feel without reservation, wants to love and cherish her children, is severed from them by her anxiety even as they lean on her.”

Elliott later added, “Not all the wire-pulling and slipper-licking in Babylon will, finally, do a fraction as much to get a picture known and seen as its own power.” “Migrant Mother” has that power.

NOBLER THAN INVENTION

Of the five additional exposures Lange made of Florence Thompson at the Pea-Pickers camp in February 1936, one other is worth comment – “The Other Migrant Mother”, in Michael Stones’s term – Lange’s view of Florence breast-feeding her baby, Norma. Stones retouched it recently, due, he claims, to the tight crop at the top of the original photo, and lack of cropping of the background at right. A big scratch on the original negative also needed retouching, Stones tells us. In the original classic “Migrant Mother” view, Lange retouched the image herself to hide the mother’s left thumb, which held onto the tent-pole at right. Scratches and minor blemishes apart, one can’t help feeling that any good documentary photograph is superior without retouching; and that such alteration is a distraction from the truth of the moment.

Michael Stones argues for a different kind of “truth”. “Because [the] mandate was to show the human side of the Depression,” Stones says, “should not the truths portrayed in the picture include those about Florence herself?” However the answer, according to Geoffrey Dunn, quoting from statements by Florence Thompson’s own daughter Norma, and son Troy, is maybe not.

“Norma, the baby in the pictures, said of her mother that she 'was a woman who loved to enjoy life, who loved her children. She loved music and she loved to dance. When I look at that photo of mother, it saddens me.”
“They were tough, tough times, but they were the best times we ever had,’ said Troy.”

Norma agreed: “We also had fun.” And that is what is so notably missing from every face in Lange’s Nipomo series – a single smile that signifies fun. (But then, it was a rainy, cold day, and the family was staying in an open lean-to, with their car broken-down.)

Regarding re-touching classic photos, one needs to be aware that critics might seek one’s hide for it, because classics are classics for good reason. And “The Other Migrant Mother” photo is at least a minor classic, as Lange originally saw and photographed it. The argument over the alteration of any of the “Migrant Mother” photographs should, perhaps, be laid to rest with the quotation that Dorothea stuck to her darkroom door in the 1930s, and which remained there throughout her working life.

Derived from a passage in Francis Bacon’s “Novum Organum”, published in 1620, the quotation is, for good reason, repeated often by photographers, and by those who write about photography. “The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution or imposture, without error or confusion”, wrote the statesman-philosopher, “is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention.”

MORE FSA WORK, A BOOK, AND A FELLOWSHIP

Not long before her death in 1965, Dorothea Lange was interviewed for the Smithsonian Oral History Project. Her interviewer, Richard Doud, asked which of her scenes most encapsulated Farm Security. Once in the 1930s, Lange replied, she had stopped at a gas station where she spotted a forlorn family of American whites from Oklahoma. “We’ve been blown out,” they told her.

“There were the people who got up that day quick and left.” said Lange of the family who had driven west when the dust storms arrived. “They saw they had no crop back there,” she told her interviewer./ “That was the beginning of the first day of the landslide that cut this continent and it’s still going on.”

On photographing people in distress, Dorothea told Doud that it is often just about sticking around and being there. “Not swooping in and swooping out in a cloud of dust.” You sit down, she said, “letting the children look at your camera with their
dirty, grimy little hands, and putting their fingers on the lens. “If you behave in a generous manner, you’re very apt to receive it, said Lange adding, “I have told everything about myself long before I asked any question.”

Photographing for the FSA until 1939, Lange acquired standing with some people in government, though she also made enemies. To be sure, her stellar views of former slaves and black sharecroppers in the Southeast; Mexican immigrants in the Southwest; Filipino lettuce workers in California; Okies and Arkies all along the route Westward; eroded fields on the Great Plains; churches, farms, schools, roads, and businesses in many locales; a distinguished pioneering woman named Queen in a bonnet; and officials, too, drove her stock up, generally.

But some had suggested she would be hired immediately, following her FSA work, but she wasn’t. She wasn’t a straightforward spot-news photographer, and her photos weren’t, generally, what “Life” and “Look” magazines were wanting either, apparently. Unable to get funding to renew her contract, Stryker let Lange go. Though she’d been temperamental and hard on Washington staff, Stryker still supported Dorothea’s book-project with husband Paul. The book was based on the physical and cultural erosion of America – it was called “An American Exodus”.

However, the decision was made not to make photos the book’s main focus, but rather one of its many elements. To Paul Strand, it seemed clear: “In such a book as this, the photographs must be the foundation materials, provide the basic structure, just as in a documentary film, and that the function of the text must be to heighten and extend their individual and total meaning.” Strand felt the photos did little more than illustrate the text. Or vice-versa. And there was “a tendency towards negation rather than active interaction between image and word.” There was also dialogue from people in the photos, which complicated artistic unity. The formula hadn’t been tried much previously, and it fell flat for Strand.

Then in March 1941, Lange was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship. Soon after the announcement of her grant, the conservative Associated Farmers organization attacked the foundation for selecting the wife of “liberal Dr. Paul Taylor”, with whom she had collaborated on “a grapes of wrath” book. Lange was the first woman to receive a photo grant from the Guggenheim, and there would not be another for 18 years when Helen Levitt won. Several others followed after Levitt.
To begin the grant-coverage, Dorothea went on a two-month field trip, and photographed the Hutterites of South Dakota and the Amana Colony in Iowa. She’d also intended to photograph the Mormons of Utah, but asked for a two-month leave of absence, because she felt exhausted and not doing her best work. On top of that, her brother, Henry Martin, was arrested for defrauding a California state-unemployment-insurance fund. Henry spent six months in jail and seven years on probation. They were different types of people, but Dorothea always felt she was her “brother’s keeper”, and was fond of him. In any case, before the completion of the grant-coverage, on December 7th, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Dorothea’s plans were at least temporarily changed.

WORK FOR THE WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY

On February 19th, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, allowing military commanders to establish military zones in the United States wherever they thought necessary, and to remove anyone they wanted from those areas, regardless of race, nationality, or age. General Dwight Eisenhower’s brother Milton was the civilian put in charge, and on March 1st, Lt. General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, announced that all persons of Japanese ancestry would have to leave the Pacific Coast military area.

Originally, the plan was to move them, via a resurrected Homestead Act, to subsistence farms in the interior that they would own. However, that scheme was replaced by an internment plan. Two-thirds of the 120,000 men, women, and children affected, were full US citizens. The United States was also at war with Germany and Italy, but only a handful of Americans of German and Italian ancestry were being penned up in concentration camps. This largest single-group, forced migration in American history seemed based solely on race.

On War Relocation Authority’s staff was an information officer who’d shifted over from the Social Security Board Dorothea’s husband Paul Taylor had worked for. When WRA decided it wanted to document its work photographically, the information man had Dorothea added to his staff. Why the WRA hired someone to photograph the evacuation and internment is a mystery, but some staffer may have wanted to point up a government scandal, since at least a few Americans were already criticizing the internments.
Although the executive order stunned West Coast Japanese-Americans, they went about their evacuation dutifully, locking their stores and houses, and dressing in their Sunday best, as they boarded buses that would take them to the camps. Some Americans thought the Japanese-Americans were national security threats, but they also hadn’t liked the economic competition from the Nisei (first generation of Japanese-Americans). The Nisei were hard-workers and efficient-savers. When they’d got the news of the order, many were desperate to prove their loyalty; they bought war bonds, donated blood, made bandages, and tried to join the armed forces (nearly all were turned away); but when the Army said the West Coast might be bombed or invaded by Japan, hysteria struck non-Nisei residents.

Assembly centers were set up in whatever spaces were temporarily available. Paul Taylor -- who acknowledged a somewhat rational basis for public fears of Japanese-American disloyalty given they weren’t yet assimilated and many retained a strong affinity for their forebears’ land -- tried to remind Americans the evacuees “were not convicted, were not found guilty of anything, that they were entitled to every consideration under American principle and fair play.”

However, early in April, Dorothea Lange began her WRA work. Her assignment was Northern California, where she photographed at the Manzanar Relocation Camp (as would Ansel Adams in 1943); other photographers covered Southern California. Lange photographed “the procedure, the process of processing,” and stayed with “the baffled, bewildered people” as they ran from place to place beforehand, trying to find information and help.

Lange said, “Everything they could possibly do for themselves, they did, asking the minimum, making practically no demands.” They even relied on their own doctors for required inoculations rather than Army doctors. Dorothea’s military supervisor, a Major Beasley, complained regularly about the “negative light” Lange was shining on these events. One complaint was that one of Lange’s photos showed plant-nursery-men in a relocation camp, working in the latticed sheds used to break the force of the sunlight. Beasley didn’t like the picture because the streaks of light and shadow made it look as if the evacuees were behind bars, or dressed in stripes.
The Japanese-Americans didn’t resent Lange. View her photos of Nisei schoolchildren standing alongside their Caucasian peers, saying the Pledge of Allegiance; or the big banner a Japanese-American grocer put on the front of his store, saying, “I Am An American.” Lange's Rolleiflex was as unimposing to the Nisei as any camera she'd ever carry was to her subjects. They treated Lange as a friend, and upon their release, many went to visit her. As with migrants a decade earlier, Dorothea Lange was precisely the right photographer to photograph them.

The critic AD Coleman wrote, “She functioned in effect as our national eye of conscience in the internment camps. Her constant concerns – the survival of human dignity under impossible conditions, the confrontation of the system by the individual, and the helpless innocence of children – were perfectly suited to the subject.” Some of her “most poignant and angry images” were made for the WRA, Coleman added.

Dorothea remembered her WRA work as one of her most intense experiences as a photographer: “On the surface, it looked like a narrow job. There was a sharp beginning to it, a sharp end; everything about it was highly concentrated.” Actually, though, the WRA work wasn’t narrow at all. “The deeper I got into it, the bigger it became,” said Lange, pointing out that the internment was often cited “as an example of what happens to us if we lose our heads.”

“I think it’s rather encouraging, as a sign of our mental health, that we admit a mistake,” said Lange. “What was of course horrifying was to do this thing completely on the basis of what blood may be coursing through a person’s veins, nothing else.”

Thirty years later, and after her death, Dorothea Lange’s WRA photos were made the core of an exhibition and book called Executive Order 9066, which reminded the country of the fragility of American justice. The show toured Washington, New York, San Francisco, and Tokyo. Of the 63 exhibited images made by a dozen photographers, the largest group was Lange’s, 27 photos.

TO A CABIN

While Dorothea Lange was photographing the evacuation of the Japanese-Americans, she suffered her first duodenal ulcer. She’d eventually also be hit by
post-polio pain syndrome, then little understood. In 1951, Dorothea received her final grant-check from the Guggenheim Foundation, and was back to work by then, after being slowed by her ailments for several years. Soon, she was also consulting with Edward Steichen on the “The Family of Man”, for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which she contributed a number of photos to.

In her later years, she’d travel overseas, even with her ailments, because one doctor suggested she would die either way; it was up to her whether she wanted to die without experiencing a tour she so much wanted to make. So husband Paul and she traveled to the Far East (including Java and Korea), the Middle East (including Egypt and Palestine), and Europe (including Ireland), and she photographed these places wonderfully, though she said she couldn’t capture the richness of the Far East on black-and-white film. And yet, she did very well with black-and-white, nevertheless.

Many intended projects kept Dorothea’s mind active, even if they were not all physically happening. However, John Szarkowski, new Director of the Museum of Modern Art’s Photo Department, insisted she do her retrospective exhibition there for him. Szarkowski knew she would say no, if he asked her. So instead, he commanded her to do it, and she worked on it to the extent she could, until her death aged 70, in October 1965.

She’d been suffering from esophageal cancer, and the exhibition opened three months after she died. It would be, along with the book “To a Cabin”, a warm tribute to her family and to her family’s place of emotional and physical calm in California, the crowning achievements at the end of her life. The Lange-Taylor Grants, awarded to photographers of conscience, carry on that legacy today.

A NATION’S EYE OF CONSCIENCE

Dorothea Lange was one of the greatest of photographers. What she overcame was formidable – crippled by polio from an early age, and saddled with a limp thereafter, she still chose to use medium and large-format cameras, rather than the lighter and faster Leica. Lange was among the greatest, though, not because she traveled farther physically than perhaps all others, though she did travel tens of thousands of miles. Not because she took more stunning news photos than all others, because news work wasn’t her style. And assuredly not because she made
more money or captured more celebrities than all others, because she made far less money than her work was worth and didn’t “do” celebrities generally. No, Lange was among the very greatest, because she discovered the “news” about people best by traveling deep into their hearts, and presenting in photos the real currency of documentary photography – how and why people live as they do. For Dorothea Lange, three elements were key: the natural environment of her subjects, their dignity, and the human story she hoped each photo would help tell.

Today, most of Lange’s photos are housed in the Library of Congress’s FSA Collection and in the Oakland Museum of California, and are, through the internet, available to all. No doubt, two phases of her career will leave their marks longest: these two phases are symbolized by a comment in a letter, and by an epitaph on a gravestone in Lakewood Memorial Park, Hughson, California.

Milton Eisenhower wrote in a letter to his former boss, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard, about the internment of Japanese-Americans: “When the war is over and we consider calmly this unprecedented migration of 120,000 people, we as Americans are going to regret the unavoidable injustices that we may have done.”

Dorothea Lange was America’s eye of conscience for the Nisei internments.

TRANSCENDING THE MEDIUM

The epitaph on the gravestone in Lakewood Memorial Park is to Florence Thompson, the subject of Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photo. A woman of Cherokee descent and already a widow when the photo was taken, Thompson bore 10 children and outlived her first husband by 52 years, and her second by nine. Gaining almost nothing from the fame thrust upon her, she lived her final years in a trailer park, dying at aged 80 in 1983, as her daughters called out for medical aid for her cancer and heart problems.

Her children had bought her a home previously, but she’d said she always needed wheels under her, and moved back to a trailer park. Thompson’s daughter Katherine, who in the iconic photograph buries her face behind her mother’s right shoulder, was to say the image left the family feeling shame, and determined never to be poor again. On her poverty, Florence Thompson spoke of living under the
bridge at Bakersfield, California. In “The Grapes of Wrath”, Steinbeck wrote of people living beneath that very span. “It was the same story”, said Thompson. “Didn’t even have a tent then, just a ratty old quilt.”

The epitaph on the gravestone begins, “Florence Leona Thompson.” It then recognizes, in its way, that a moment captured by a photographer on a cold, wet day in March 1936, at a Pea-Picker’s camp in Nipomo, California had achieved what few photos ever achieve.

“Migrant Mother”, the epitaph continues. “A Legend of the Strength of American Motherhood.”

“Migrant Mother”, Dorothea Lange’s greatest photograph, had, the epitaph seems to say, transcended its medium to become part of the folklore of an entire nation.

LANGE AT AUCTION

It’s a shame more of the money involved in art-collecting Dorothea Lange’s greatest photos couldn’t have been shared with more of her subjects, but then she photographed tens of thousands of people, and she didn’t earn a queen’s ransom herself. However, collectors continue to cash in, as a Sotheby’s auction on October 11, 2005 indicates. At that auction, a stack of 32 vintage Lange “Oakie” prints, including “Migrant Mother”, made $296,000. Bill Hendrie, whose family came from Oklahoma, had salvaged the mounted prints from a San Jose Chamber of Commerce dumpster in the 1960s, and held onto them. After his death, his daughter Marian Tankersley sold them via Sotheby’s. The joint-highest grossing item in the sale (with Weston’s “The Breast” of 1921) was “White Angel Bread Line.” That earliest major Depression-era work by Lange, taken in 1933, sold for $822,400, then a record for a 20th century photograph at auction. That October day in 2005, the Sotheby’s sale of photographs totaled $5.5 million, $10.3 million over two days.
Gordon Parks: The Jackie Robinson/Muhammad Ali of the Arts—
Researched/Written by David Joseph Marcou.

“Work hard and have faith in yourself.” – Sarah Ross Parks’s best words to her son, Gordon.

“I’ve had a great sense of curiosity and a great sense of just wanting to achieve. I just forgot I was black, and walked in and asked for a job, and tried to be prepared for what I was asking for.” — Gordon Parks.

To Gordon Parks, the camera was “a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs.” – “New York Times”, March 8, 2006.

It was once said that, if a person was photographed in Washington, D.C. by a Scurlock, the famous family of African-American photo-portraitists whose works are now housed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Archives Center, then the photo-subject had been photographed by the VanDerZees and Parkses of Washington. James VanDerZee and Gordon Parks have long been thought of as residing near the top of the photographic ladder, with the Scurlocks added in, whether or not you consider them Great Black Photographers or, simply, Great Photographers.

Like Leonardo Da Vinci and Edward Steichen, Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks was one of the most versatile and resourceful artists in history. He not only took remarkable photos and wrote beautifully for “Life” magazine, but also wrote successful novels, memoirs, books of poetry, musical scores, librettos, films, and could play the piano well, too. He experienced a great deal of racism, though, making his way forward, and documented a fair amount of it in his memoirs, films, etc.

Gordon Parks’s heart was passionate about many ventures, with rare heat and precision of purpose. Showing great ability and stamina was his fuel every time, no matter the venture. Though Gordon Parks was one man, his experiences were diverse, his talents varied and immense, his achievements superb. Mr. Parks’s main idea in taking photos applied to his whole life – “The subject matter is so much more important than the photographer [/artist].” Thus, his intense focus on the arts he created, via the people and world around him.

EARLY LIFE
Born in the small prairie town of Fort Scott, Kansas on Nov. 30, 1912, Gordon was the son of Sarah Ross Parks and Andrew Jackson Parks, a farmer who raised corn, beets, turnips, potatoes, collard greens, and tomatoes. The family also had a few ducks, chickens, and hogs. When Gordon was 11 years old, three white boys threw him into the Marmaton River, knowing he couldn't swim. He had the presence of mind to duck underwater so they wouldn't see him make it safely back to shore, crawling along river-bottom.

Gordon was the youngest of 15 children in his family, and attended “segregated school”, but Fort Scott could not afford a fully segregated high school (that town’s elementary schools were segregated fully into separate buildings then, Gordon’s elementary school being the Plaza School), so blacks attended high school in the same building as whites, but were not allowed to play school sports or attend school social activities. Also, they were discouraged from higher education. His high school teacher told him college would be a waste of money. He dropped out of high school at 14 when his mother died. But the greatest lesson he’d ever learn came from his mother, Sarah, who preached to him and the rest of the family the value of dignity and hard work in overcoming bigotry.

It’s said young Gordon spent the night sleeping beside his mother’s coffin before she was buried, to face down his fears of death, and to be close to the first woman he’d ever loved. His father soon sent him to live with one of Gordon's sisters and her husband in Minnesota’s Twin Cities. His brother-in-law kicked him out in thirty below temperatures, and Gordon stayed afloat on the streets, traveling all night on city streetcars.

Struggling to survive, young Mr. Parks worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps; in brothels as a piano player; as a big band singer; as a semi-pro basketball player; and as a train waiter. While working in a brothel, Mr. Parks had witnessed the stabbing of a man, causing Gordon to quit that job.

TURNING POINT

In 1937, Mr. Parks was working as a train waiter on a train (the North Coast Limited) between Chicago and Seattle. A key turning point came when he saw photographs of migrant farm workers in a “Life” magazine a passenger had left behind. Photographers working for the government's Farm Security Administration had taken the photos to illustrate the Great Depression’s effects. "I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs," he told an interviewer in 1999. "I knew at that point I had to have a
camera." Parks quickly bought one at a pawnshop in Seattle, then spent three years teaching himself photography.

Mr. Parks later noted, “I’d become sort of involved in things that were happening to people. No matter what color they be, whether they be Indians, Negroes, the poor white person, or anyone who was I thought, more or less getting a bad shake.” He added: “I’ve had a great sense of curiosity and a great sense of just wanting to achieve. I just forgot I was black, and walked in and asked for a job, and tried to be prepared for what I was asking for.”

In 1940, Parks convinced the wife (Madeline) of the owner of a women's clothing store in St. Paul (Frank Murphy) to hire him as a fashion photographer. He'd picked up a camera he didn't know how to operate, and though Mrs. Murphy talked her husband into giving him a chance, the pictures came out double-exposed on that camera, except one: his beautifully composed view of a woman seated, wearing a fashion-plate dress. His work impressed Marva Louis, wife of legendary boxer Joe Louis, who convinced Parks to move to Chicago. She helped him get work shooting fashion and society photos; Parks also shot pictures of poverty on Chicago's South Side. Always looking to record/mirror beauty, he knew the socially-conscious side of life was crucial too.

By 1942, he was taking good-enough photos to win a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to study documentary photography in Washington, DC, under Roy Stryker at the famed Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration, and soon after, its successor at the Works Progress Administration, the Office of War Information, where he became one of the staff photographers. Other notable photographers on-staff included Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Jack Delano, Carl Mydans, and Ben Shahn.

Although Mr. Parks found himself among superb professionals, he'd already trained his eye, ear, and heart to make his mark as a documentary photographer (and writer) before he’d joined FSA. In the late 1930s, he'd self-studied the works of the FSA photographers and filmmakers, and realized visual communication could work as a language in ways other expressive forms might not. Photography and film were, for him, personal, universal activities that posited a mirror of experience. He soon saw how he could make life better for others via his camera’s mirror on the world.
Mr. Stryker had said the new man should photograph a documentary subject, and Mr. Parks focused on the WPA cleaning woman, Ella Watson. The first day he photographed her, he posed that African-American lady holding a mop and broom in front of an American flag, calling it his own “American Gothic”, reminiscent of Grant Wood’s famous 1931 painting of a white farm pair holding farm implements with the same title; the image objectified an artistic response Mr. Parks had in mind, of subjugated black workers in America. Ms. Watson’s subjective response did not enter in, except Mr. Parks asked her to show a stern look. The photographer was inspired by actual events. Ms. Watson’s father had apparently been killed by a lynch mob; and the photographer himself had recently been refused service by a clothing store, a movie theater, and a restaurant.

Stryker stated it was a photo-portrait that could get his whole photo-crew thrown out of work, for showing a put-upon black cleaning lady, but he told Mr. Parks to do some photos of Ella in her home, with her offspring around, etc. Though the latter photos weren’t bad, Stryker knew he’d found a great photographer when he first saw the types of pictures Mr. Parks turned into prints. Both versions of “American Gothic” are still considered classics today.

The racism in the nation's capital then was daunting, and Mr. Parks had to bite his tongue more than he liked, because he was a man who wanted to speak his mind, and could speak it well. When the Historical Section became part of the Office of War Information, Mr. Parks was asked to work there. He photographed the training of the first black fighter pilot unit in US history, the 332nd Fighter Group, based near Detroit. He was not allowed, though, to accompany the unit to Europe and WWII, partly because he was black. He relocated to Harlem circa 1944, doing freelance photography, including for “Vogue” magazine the next 4-5 years.

GROUND-BREAKING HIRE BY “LIFE” MAGAZINE

At the close of World War II, Roy Stryker asked Mr. Parks to work with him on the Standard Oil of New Jersey documentary project (1945-48). Parks photographed small town life and industrial areas. Then, he was hired by “Life” magazine, and from 1948-1970, was the first black photo-journalist employed by that magazine. Previous to “Life’s” hiring of Parks, blacks were generally depicted in stereotypical ways in that magazine, not in the complicated human ways Parks would show them and other Americans.

In his more than 20 years photographing and writing for “Life,” Mr. Parks completed 300 assignments, ranging from stylized portraits of celebrity beauty to
somber studies of racism and poverty. He spent 1949 through 1951 at the Paris bureau of “Life”, photographing everything from a state funeral to everyday scenes. A 1956 photo essay by him documented the humiliation of segregation in the Deep South. Southerners twice threatened to lynch him while he was photographing the civil rights movement and other events for the magazine.

The first picture-story Gordon Parks proposed to “Life” magazine that was accepted had been “The Harlem Gang Story” (1948). His sensitive portrait of gang leader Red Jackson smoking a cigarette by a broken window, says a lot about unrealized dreams among some African-Americans of that era.

As telling as was his first photo-essay for “Life”, though, another photo-essay by Gordon Parks about black people in the 1956 Montgomery, AL, area is more inspirational. Although Martin Luther King Jr. was near too, Parks focused on everyday black Americans there. Years later, Gerhard Steidel, who produced a five-volume book set of the collected works of Gordon Parks, released on what would have been his 100th birthday in 2012, said, “I believe Gordon Parks was, with his camera, a fighter – on the right side (of history) …. the people he photographed trusted him, they had 100% faith in him.” His subjects understood that at least one person was going to make sure their story got told, even if they themselves were trapped in a narrative almost impossible to escape. “Segregation Story: Gordon Parks” was eventually exhibited in New York City and Chicago.

Mr. Parks’s rich, documentary photo of a black postman in western-style safari hat reading the mail to an illiterate black couple on their porch, speaks volumes for the crucial human capacities of these photo-subjects and their photographer. The relevant “New York Times” Lens feature by Maurice Berger, “A Radically Prosaic Approach to Civil Rights Images,” (7-16-12) tells this family’s human story more expansively:

“Gordon Parks’s portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton Sr., an older black couple in their Mobile, Ala., home in 1956, appears to have little in common with the images we have come to associate with civil rights photography. It is in color, unlike most photographs of the movement. Its subject matter was neither newsworthy nor historic, unlike more widely published journalistic images of the racial murders, police brutality, demonstrations and boycotts that characterized the epic battle for racial justice and equality.
“Gordon Parks was born 100 years ago this year (2012, he died in 2006). In honor of this milestone, the Schomburg Center [of Harlem] is exhibiting 100 photographs. On Lens, previous posts discuss Mr. Parks’s work:

- Empathetic Portraits »
- A Gift to N.Y. »

“Yet, as effectively as any civil rights photograph, the portrait was a forceful ‘weapon of choice,’ as Mr. Parks would say, in the struggle against racism and segregation. He took the pictures on assignment for a September 1956 ‘Life’ magazine photo-essay, ‘The Restraints: Open and Hidden’, which documented the everyday activities and rituals of one extended black family living in the rural South under Jim Crow segregation.

“There were 20 photographs eventually published in ‘Life’, the bulk of Mr. Parks’s work from that shoot was thought to have been lost. That is, until the Gordon Parks Foundation discovered more than 70 color transparencies at the bottom of an old storage box, wrapped in paper and masking tape and marked, ‘Segregation Series.’ Not all of the ‘Segregation’ photographs are prosaic as the Thornton portrait. Some are ominous and intense, providing stark evidence of the unjustness of segregation and the ways it endangered democracy: the ‘colored only’ signs that marginalized one community as assuredly as they enriched another; the backbreaking labor; the squalor and overcrowding; and the unequal, ramshackle accommodations.

“But most of the images are optimistic and affirmative, like the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thornton. They focus on the family’s everyday activities, and their resolve to get on with their lives as normally as possible, in spite of an environment that restricts and intimidates: Mrs. Thornton cradling her newborn great-grandchild (below); her son, now a father himself, on a stroll with his children; a couple filling out tax returns; a Sunday church service; boys fishing in a creek; a woman and her granddaughter window shopping; teenagers hanging out in front of a country store; and mourners at a funeral.
“These quiet, compelling photographs elicit a reaction that Mr. Parks believed was critical to the undoing of racial prejudice: empathy. Throughout his career, he endeavored to help viewers, white and black, to understand and share the feelings of others. It was with this goal in mind that he set out to document the lives of the Thornton family, creating images meant to alter the way Americans viewed one another and, ultimately, themselves.

“More than anything, the ‘Segregation Series’ challenged the abiding myth of racism: that the races are innately unequal, a delusion that allows one group to declare its superiority over another by capriciously ascribing to it negative traits, abnormalities or pathologies. It is the very fullness, even ordinariness, of the lives of the Thornton family that most effectively contests these notions of difference, which had flourished in a popular culture that offered no more than an incomplete or distorted view of African-American life.

“As the writer Thulani Davis observes, white Americans, in the civil rights era, had little awareness that black people ‘lived in a complete universe.’ In our private lives ‘we were whole. We enjoyed a richness that the mainstream almost never showed, but that we took for granted just as white people did.’

“As the holistic depiction of black life in the rural South in the ‘Segregation Series’ demonstrates, the aspirations, responsibilities, vocations, and rituals of the Thornton family were no different from those of white Americans. Yet, these religious and law-abiding people, and others like them, were persecuted. It is this incongruity, made visible by Mr. Parks’s photographs, which may have appealed to the empathy and fairness of some of ‘Life’s’ white readers. It challenged them to reconsider both their attitudes about segregation and the stereotypes they assigned to people who were little different from them.

“The complete and positive images also helped to bolster the morale of blacks in the face of withering prejudice. This is one reason Mr. Parks’s quiet portrait of the Thorntons is an important civil rights image, demonstrating as it does the historic role of photography in black culture.

“Throughout a century of oppression, photography served as a ray of light for black Americans, illuminating the humanity, beauty and achievements long hidden in the culture at large. By allowing a people to record and celebrate the affirmative aspects of their lives, the camera helped to countermand the toxic effects of stereotypes on their self-esteem.
“One detail in Mr. Parks’s photograph of the Thorntons underscores the medium’s restorative power: the ornately framed picture of the couple that hangs on the wall above them. The image dates to the time of their marriage in 1903, when he was 29 and she was 17. A close examination reveals that it was spliced together from two separate images. And so, what first appears to be a wedding picture is, in fact, the restitution of a lost history. The image serves as both a commemoration of the couple’s union and a poignant metaphor of the resilience and urgency of their bond against a tide spanning decades of intolerance and adversity.

“Another object, the coffee table in the foreground with family snapshots proudly displayed under its glass top, underscores photography’s esteemed place in black life. These details remind us of the extent to which blacks were able to represent themselves in a positive light, requiring neither the cooperation of the media nor the work of photographers like Mr. Parks.

“As the popularity of inexpensive and easily accessible cameras swept across the nation in the 1900s, black Americans, like their white counterparts, relied on snapshots to document and memorialize their lives. Millions of blacks used their own cameras (and before that patronized a nationwide syndicate of black-owned photo studios) to accomplish for themselves what a century and a half of mainstream representation usually could not: the creation of positive, multifaceted images that could embolden a people against the forces of intolerance.”
Gordon Parks continued creating photo-essays for “Life” in the 1960s. Among his most successful photo-essays there are: “The Black Muslims” (1963); “The Death of Malcolm X” (1965); “On the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.” (1968); “The Black Panthers and the Police” (1970); and “Papa Rage: A Visit with Eldridge Cleaver” (1970). Matthew Clair writes for Diverse Arts Project that Mr. Parks covered blacks differently than many American photographers before, as in his “Life” photo-essay depicting New York City blacks with real feelings and attitudes not simply as art-objects. The in-focus family are the Fontenelles of New York.

On that magazine’s March 8, 1968 front-cover is Mr. Parks’s photo of the angled profile of a young black girl in the shadows, with a tear in her eye. She is Ellen Fontenelle, and we don’t know why she is crying, but “Life’s” writers suggest what the results will be with the cover/story’s title: “The Negro and the Cities: The Cry That Will Be Heard”. Blacks’ self-awareness and their interest in improving their lives well-beyond the era of segregation, i.e., as human beings equal to whites, emerges strongly. The matriarch of the “Life” coverage-family, Bessie Fontenelle, had asked Mr. Parks early on the reasons for his coverage of her family, and he had assured her his photos and words would help her family and other black families like hers, improve their lives.

Among the many other beautiful and sensitive photo-portraits Mr. Parks had made/would make were those depicting Malcolm X (Mr. Parks was godfather to Malcolm’s daughter Ms. Shabazz), Muhammad Ali (many times, including in 1966 London where Ali defeated Brian London), Angela Davis, Ingrid Bergman, Barbra Streisand, Aaron Copland, and Duke Ellington, as well as his famous portrait of the Muslim woman Ethel Shariff in Chicago, 1968, standing in front of an orderly grouping of “Sisters” – and of photo-geniuses Edward Steichen and Roy Stryker. Mr. Parks often used smaller-format cameras than most studio photographers did, and worked more quickly, like photojournalists were doing more of then.

Gordon Parks also photographed a pivotal story for “Life” in 1961, about a poor and very sick boy living just outside Rio de Janeiro, in the Favela of Catacumba (meaning “Death”), “a desolate mountainside of misery”, as Mr. Parks put it. The 12-year-old boy was Flavio da Silva. He suffered from the most severe form of asthma, and had the bone structure, height, and weight of a much younger boy.

Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State under President Kennedy, had just warned the US Government that if it didn't give aid immediately to Latin America's poor, the entire region would go Communist. Mr. Parks had just been shown the “New York

The outpouring of money and good will for Flavio was enormous; $30,000 (a huge amount then) was raised and a new house for his family was built, as Flavio was brought to Denver for treatment. He left two years later, and wanted to stay with Mr. Parks. However, it couldn't be arranged, and Flavio returned home, in better condition than he'd been in, in Brazil. Gordon Parks visited Flavio in 1977, and made a photo-portrait of him then too, publishing a book about him in 1978. The once-put-upon boy had grown up, but his hopes in meeting Parks earlier had been deflated somewhat, as is apparent in his no-nonsense look into the 1977 camera.

Thirty-five years (1996) after his story ran in “Life,” Flavio's situation was reviewed again by Mr. Parks. Poverty, an ever-present foe, lingered: Flavio had lost his job of 13 years, and at age 47 by then, he’d collected only $400 in severance pay. His father was confined to a mental institution, and couldn't remember his children's names. The “Life” house was crumbling from neglect.

Mr. Parks's groundbreaking job with “Life” often put him in awkward situations. Some black militants criticized him for working for a white publication, and Parks once upset other black photographers by not joining their protest against “Life” for not employing them. On the other hand, “Life” editors began to question Parks's ability to be objective toward black subjects. Still, in the 1960s, Parks photographed black radical groups, including the Black Panthers and Black Muslims. “Life” had assigned white photographers to cover the groups, but they were not able to get access to them, so the editors turned to Parks. He wrote an essay about the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X that provoked a plot to murder him-self as well. “Life” sent his family abroad to protect them and put Mr. Parks under armed guard for a time.

NEW GROUND-BREAKING VENTURES

After his years with “Life” (he actually continued to contribute there until its first closing in 1972, while directing Essence), Mr. Parks, a co-founder of the black style magazine “Essence”, directed its editorial office from 1970-1973. His keen interest in honest human beauty, especially among racial minorities, continued coming to the fore there. It couldn’t have been easy for Mr. Parks to weather the racial prejudice that continued to assail him and others like him, but he managed to do stellar work, nevertheless. Mainly his photojournalism is less hard-news-
oriented, and more the work of a sensitive, objective observer, who is generally gentle-enough in his compassion.

In the coming years, Mr. Parks also became the first black artist to write, direct, and score a Hollywood film (“The Learning Tree”, 1969, which Carl Mydans had advised Mr. Parks to do originally), based on his 1964 autobiographical novel by that title. Newt Winger is a young African-American man growing up in Kansas in the 1920s and 1930s. As a witness to the crime, he gives testimony in a murder committed by the father of his hot-blooded friend Marcus Savage. Booker. Booker commits suicide and Marcus confronts Newt with a gun. A vicious fight occurs, which Newt wins, but then Marcus is killed by a racist sheriff.

Gordon Parks also directed the very successful, pioneering “blaxploitation” film “Shaft” (1971) starring Richard Roundtree. “Shaft” stands black stereotypes on their heads, in an action-packed, shoot-em up thriller with some tongue-in-cheek humor included. Its trailer says “hotter than Bond, cooler than Bullitt”. Its print-ad says: “The [Italian] mob wanted Harlem back. They got Shaft… up to here. Shaft’s his name. Shaft’s his game.”

Mr. Parks told the “Village Voice” in 1976 that he did not make black exploitation films; what he helped invent, though, was a new, more honest genre of black films in America. “Shaft’s Big Score” (1972) followed, then “The Super Cops” (1974), and the bio-pic about the notable blues singer Huddie Ledbetter, known as “Leadbelly” (1976). “The Learning Tree” and “Shaft” are included in the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry, the highest honor bestowed on US films.

"I still don't know exactly who I am," Mr. Parks wrote in his 1979 memoir, "To Smile in Autumn." He added, "I've disappeared into myself so many different ways that I don't know who 'me' is." The great thing about all his abilities is they were generally self-taught; no one had really told him he couldn't do those things, so he just did them, superbly at that. In the area of film, "Gordon Parks was like the Jackie Robinson of film," Donald Faulkner, the director of the New York State Writers Institute, once said. "He broke ground for a lot of people -- Spike Lee, John Singleton." Jackie Robinson was the first African American player allowed to play Major League Baseball in the modern era; he starred for the Brooklyn Dodgers from April 15, 1947 to Oct. 10, 1956. Gordon Parks was both a kind of Jackie Robinson and a Muhammad Ali of the Arts generally -- the first to do many of the things he did, and one of the very best at doing them, too.
Mr. Parks’ diverse and early successes had taken him far from his rural Kansas roots. He lived in a Manhattan high-rise with a view of the East River. He spent much of the 1980s and 1990s helping to create retrospectives of his work. One, “Half Past Autumn: The Art of Gordon Parks”, toured American museums in the late 1990s. Gordon Parks also composed the music and libretto for the ballet “Martin”, about Martin Luther King, Jr., and wrote a poem about his own father called “The Funeral”. He authored and was the subject of many books, including several memoirs; he earlier had even done a how-to book, “Camera Portraits: The Techniques and Principles of Documentary Photography” (1948).

Gordon Parks married and divorced thrice (to Sally Alvis, Elizabeth Campbell, and his third ex-wife and final estate executer, Genevieve Young). When author Candace Bushnell first moved to Manhattan, she became a good friend of his. Also, Mr. Parks was a close friend of the beautiful heiress Gloria Vanderbilt, mother of CNN anchor Anderson Cooper. Some historians have even said they were longtime companions. Why an artist so attuned to the sufferings of poor minorities would become so close to a woman of such great wealth may be partly because Ms. Vanderbilt appreciated Mr. Parks’s work and believed she could aid him with it. It also might be that, like notable Fox News Anchor Bill O’Reilly often says regarding his own fame and fortune, Mr. Parks felt he’d worked for everything he’d gotten in life and deserved his new-found status.

As Mr. Parks wrote late in life: “I think that after nearly 85 years upon this planet that I have a right after working so hard at showing the desolation and the poverty, to show something beautiful for somebody as well.” In fact, he’d spent much of his life before then showing sorrowfully beautiful things and beautifully happy things too. He wrote that he got so much work done over the years, due to his early upbringing: “I think maybe the rural influence in my life helped me, in a sense, of knowing how to get close to people and talk to them and get my work done.” Also, as youngest of 15 children, he knew what a youngest child from a poor family had to do to stay alive. Mr. Parks himself had four children; one preceded him in death, Gordon Jr., who had directed the notable film “Super Fly”, and who died in a plane crash on April 3, 1979, while making a film in Nairobi, Kenya. He was 44.

Many photo exhibitions (his first, apparently, was for Kodak; a Kodak staffer had told him early, if he kept up his good work, Kodak would exhibit his work; and one recent posthumous, 3-part show of his work at Wichita State University through early April 2016, in honor of the 10th anniversary since his passing,
including a group of his photos from Camp Nathan Hale’s interracial youth program in New York State in 1943), and other notable celebrations of Gordon Sr.’s works and life marked his time on earth.

THE BATTLES FOR SOCIAL ESTEEM

Mr. Parks was thought very highly of, in later life, despite the harsh racial and social discrimination he’d faced early on. He'd been spit on, beaten up, and called the “n-word” numerous times. As he wrote: “I suffered evils, but without allowing them to rob me of the freedom to expand.” He authored four autobiographical memoirs, and one at least, “Voices in the Mirror”, begins with nightmares in which Parks must do physical combat with Death to go on, with Death already having done serious damage to him (perhaps reminiscent of his sleeping beside his mother’s coffin the night before her burial, when he was 14).

The challenges Mr. Parks faced over time likely took a toll on him. As he once wrote: “…winter is entering. Half past autumn has arrived.” In a way, though, autumn was always half past for him, with winter entering, because his wisdom was very much experiential and eternal. But he kept turning out stellar work, even though life must have been hard on his family too. Never graduating high school, Mr. Parks did earn more than 40 Honorary Doctorates and Degrees. And in 1988, President Ronald Reagan bestowed on him the National Medal of the Arts.

A man I know says to people, “You’re going to die. Nothing you can do about it.” But there IS A LOT you can do about it, by doing many decent things for other people while you live. As Jackie Robinson once said, a life is important only in the positive impact it has on other lives. Gordon Parks had come a long, roundabout way from Fort Scott, Kansas, to New York and beyond. And he'd visited many great, happy, and sad places in-between. Somehow it seems if God saves a special place in Heaven for those souls who have overcome nearly every sling and arrow thrown at them, God saved a special place for Gordon Parks.

Mr. Parks returned more than once to Fort Scott, to photograph the area of his birth. Once, he even traversed the nation tracking down his former Plaza School classmates to photograph, but “Life” didn’t publish that coverage. He was even robbed by the husband of one of his former classmates after taking their picture.

One photo he took on a visit to Fort Scott, though, speaks volumes. The frame is mainly filled with greenery in the countryside, but in the lower right-central
portion of it, like a cut-out, is a modest light-filled opening, with the silhouette of a
young woman, wearing a 19th-century-style dress, a school marm’s perhaps, in the
distance. She is at right of a lean, still young boy, and she has her arm over his
shoulders. It’s as if the middle-aged Gordon Parks had found his greatest happiness
where he was once afraid he might not re-find it, but did – in his birthplace, where
he still remembered the love of his parents, the value of an honest day's work, and
the play with his siblings too. He'd worked hard and he’d always had faith in
himself, just like his mother said he should, before she died when he was 14.

To Gordon Parks, the camera was “a weapon against poverty, against racism,
against all sorts of social wrongs.” His poetry was keen too, as in: “The Funeral.”

“After many snows I was home again./Time had whittled down to mere hills the
great mountains of my childhood./Raging rivers I once swam trickled now like
gentle streams and the wide road curving on to China or Kansas City/or perhaps
Calcutta/ had withered to a crooked path of dust/ending abruptly at the county
burial ground./Only the giant that was my father remained the same./A hundred
strong men strained beneath his coffin/when they bore him to his grave.”

Pia Lindstrom said, after he’d passed, that her mother, Ingrid Bergman, asked for
only one photographer (Mr. Parks) when she first worked with second husband-to-
be Roberto Rosselini, who’d direct her first in the film “Stromboli.” Ms. Lindstrom
added that near the end of his life, Mr. Parks, though weak from terminal cancer,
wrote poetry every night before he went to sleep. His muses were daunting, but his
talents towering.

LEGACIES

Gordon Parks died of prostate cancer and complications from high blood pressure
in Manhattan, NY, at age 93 on March 7, 2006. His funeral was at Riverside
Church there, whose interdenominational congregation comprises 40 ethnic
groups, with a strong social justice history. Former New York Mayor David
Dinkins, the only African-American mayor of that city so far, said when
interviewed at Mr. Parks’s service, “His was a life well-lived, that really rings
true.” Gordon Parks’s burial was in Fort Scott, KS, his hometown.

Many schools are named for Mr. Parks, and in 2000, while Gordon lived, Denzel
Washington did the filmic story of Mr. Parks’s life, “Half Past Autumn”, based on
Mr. Parks’s memoir of that name. His photos are still published, and his films still
viewed. His poetry is still read, and his music is still performed. His living
offspring still carry on his legacy as a true Renaissance Man, the most versatile of
titans. But before he belonged to the world, he was an American Champion.

To be sure, Ms. Lange and Mr. Parks were The Peoples’ Champions, World
Champions in fact, like my British friend Bert Hardy, “Picture Post” magazine’s
chief photographer (see my online and paperback biography of Mr. Hardy, “The
Cockney Eye”), and pioneering American social documentary photographer Lewis
Hine (see my paperback “Lewis W. Hine, 1874-1940”). It helps me and others to
be inspired by photographers of their vision and achievements. People can read my
end-noted DL essay “Photographic Equality”, a short-form version of my Gordon
Parks essay, a short-form essay about Bert Hardy, and a short-form essay about
Lewis Hine, plus my essays about other photographer-heroes of mine, online and
in paperback, in my book “The Photographic Spirit”. And other books by me cover
writer-heroes of mine too, etc. -- e.g., “James Cameron’s World (1911-1985)”.

Gordon Parks wrote: “There's another horizon out there, one more horizon that you
have to make for yourself and let other people discover it, and someone else will
take it further on, you know.” I’ve taken Ms. Lange’s and Mr. Parks’s stories a bit
further on here. I’ll continue to take my own and others’ stories further on in
future, too. And further up the road from there, I hope my biological and spiritual
offspring continue to additionally do the same for me, for them, and for all of us.

Dorothea Lange’s FSA/WRA and Gordon Parks’s FSA/WPA photos are reproduced
via the US Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, DC. I’m
also grateful to many other archives too, including Family of Man (for both Lange
and Parks), Time-Life, Getty Images, Smithsonian Institution, the Gordon Parks
Foundation, La Crosse Public Library, and Wisconsin Historical Society, but mainly
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