



Minnesota IN THE Camera's Eye

1935–1943

Alan Trachtenberg

What we know of daily life in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s comes largely from an extraordinary collection of photographs made for a government agency, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), from 1936 to 1943. Concerned at first with the plight of farmers, sharecroppers, and migrant farm workers, the photographic project soon became a national program of epic and epochal proportions. The result was a file of 77,000 prints and many more images and negatives from various sources, organized by subject headings and geographical regions.¹

A Minnesota story has already been extracted from this great archive: *Picturing Minnesota, 1936–1943*, edited by Robert L. Reid. An invaluable document of the look of Minnesota's "greatest generation" during the hard times before the war, this book provides a baseline for further looking and reading of pictures. It returns you to the FSA collection itself, where you soon discover many Minnesotas awaiting selection and construction out of some 1,700 prints, the work of half a dozen photographers over seven years. The photographs depict "Depres-

sion" and "the Thirties" in ways more diverse, complex, and personal than the stereotyped expectation of suffering and abjection across the land.²

Once you open the file, there is always more to see, other ways of looking and reading. Housed in four-drawer steel cabinets in the Prints and Photographs room of the Library of Congress, the collection—"the file"—includes prints, images, and negatives made in 1935 for the Resettlement Administration (RA) and then for the FSA, in connection with New Deal policy aimed at reviving and restructuring American agriculture.³ In the process, the project expanded into a general ethnology of everyday life, including cities and urban regions. National in scope, it was also national in its aim to identify what was unique and distinctive about the nation. When war broke out in Europe and it seemed likely that the United States would become involved, the Office of War

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FACING PAGE: *Russell Lee, "Goodwill store and Mission church. Minneapolis, Minnesota," May 1937*

Information (OWI) absorbed the project. Pictures of an emerging home front were added to the collection, scenes showing the country's readiness and willingness to fight.

The file developed as a unique blend of personal visions that are also objective records of scenes, things, and persons witnessed by the photographer and recorded with the precision typical of the camera. No news photographs, no touched-up portraits of celebrities, just plain people whose clothing, places, work and games, gestures, and expressions collectively bespeak an astonishingly diverse nation undergoing particular and collective histories, as viewed through diverse photographic eyes. The collection serves as an education in how to look and what to see as the nation's reality.

"There are no pictures of sit-down strikes," Roy Stryker, head and guiding spirit of the project, recalled years later. "No apple salesmen on street corners, not a single shot of Wall Street."⁴ FSA cameras arrived too late for some of the worst visible effects the crash, but Stryker also excluded pictures of news and current affairs as a matter of policy, wanting to avoid any chance of antago-



John Vachon, "Unemployed men in Gateway District, Minneapolis, Minnesota," September 1939

nizing members of Congress skeptical of the project. Except for obligatory pictures of the practical work of the RA and FSA, the photographs actually helped marginalize scenes of confrontation and class violence in the collective public picture of the decade. Begun in 1935, the project could not have recorded the 1934 strikes and violence in Minneapolis in any case. Instead, the file covers the time after 1936 when New Deal policies had haltingly begun to work. By the OWI era, preparation for war had turned everything around—the economy was at full steam ahead, unemployment abolished by the military draft, and food production back to normal.

In the early years of the decade, Minnesota suffered cruelly. Mills and grain elevators in the Twin Cities shut down; mines and railroads and the lumber industry were severely hurt. Workers and farmers welcomed programs calling for radical change, an end to capitalism—if not socialism and communism as such (though many did espouse these more radical goals)—and, at least, public ownership of utilities, which Governors Floyd B. Olson and Elmer A. Benson openly espoused. Turbulence continued into the later years of the decade even as conditions improved. In 1939 employees of the Works Progress Administration, a major government agency providing relief in the form of work, went on strike to protest a cut in pay. No sign of this protracted and bitter struggle appears in the FSA pictures. But by this and other social and political activism, a Minnesota heritage was sealed.

John Vachon, "Pawnshop in Gateway District, Minneapolis, Minnesota," September 1939



The 1930s established the labor movement as a significant presence, which helped the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party emerge after World War II as chief opponent of the Republicans, who before then had had rule of the state more or less to themselves.⁵

The Thirties also opened new possibilities for photography. Picture magazines like *Life* and *Look*, along with cinema, helped create a new visual environment of pictures taken directly from the actual world. In 1973 Stryker wrote:

In 1936 photography . . . was fast being discovered as a serious tool of communications, a new way for a thoughtful, creative person to make a statement. Flash bulbs and small cameras were being used for the first time. The rotogravure was dying; the first big picture magazines which would take its place were already being roughed out. In a year or so, and with a suddenness matched only by the introduction of television twelve years later, picture-taking became a national industry. We would have been insensitive indeed not to have realized that we were an important part of a movement.⁶

FSA photographs were eye-opening images in their own time. Reproduced widely in newspapers and magazines,

they taught the public how to look at common scenes of everyday life, how to see the familiar in a new perspective of significance.

John Vachon recalled in 1968 that Stryker had hired him in 1936 to copy captions and stamp names of photographers on the backs of 8-by-10 prints. “Rather deadly work,” until one day he “turned over one of the photographs and really looked at it.” It was a picture by Walker Evans of a fruit stand in Louisiana. “I really looked at it, and it was quite amazing.” He began to turn them all over and “look at all of them with increasing care and interest. . . . Here was the whole U. S. A. spread before me.” He realized that he had to go out and make pictures himself.⁷ In September 1939, after Nazi Germany launched World War II by invading Poland, Vachon went home to St. Paul and roamed with his camera through the skid row, or Gateway district, of Minneapolis. He was still a beginner, not yet an official FSA photographer, though Stryker had given him hints. What he had learned from Walker Evans and others served him well on this first significant outing. Russell Lee had covered the same Gateway turf two years before in the company of Roy Stryker, a rare occasion when the director himself made some pictures for the file. Vachon would have captioned, stamped, and filed the Lee and Stryker photos, and he more or less followed

Roy Stryker, “Street scene, Minneapolis, Minnesota,” 1937



With its physical connection to the “real world,” the camera seemed a perfect instrument for discovery and recovery of the lost world of the older, “real” America.

their lead in aiming his camera at idle men lounging on benches or lying on the grass and also at pawn shops, saloons, flop houses, hiring halls, storefront missions, and a newsstand. Hard times are implied by the down-and-out look of the men and the streets, but just as important is the activity of Vachon's camera, changing angles, moving closer or farther back, cropping and shaping pictures that inform the eye without sacrificing the pleasure of seeing closely what is there. The pictures show Vachon discovering his way of seeing and of picturing the world.

In “Newsstand, Gateway District, Minneapolis” (fig.1), a man perches on the edge of some bundles in front of a newsstand. Its canvas flaps are tied back, creating the effect of a tent. His clothing worn and weathered, his white hair cascading under a rimless cap that declares a timely message for hard times—“Just say charge it”—and his pipe clutched tightly between his teeth, the man sits on the left of the picture at a right angle to the counter. Within the tented enclosure we see a hand making a gesture such as grinding out a cigarette or laying down a coin. The hand seems disembodied, detached, something appearing out of the shadows. To the right, there's a neat pile of newspapers fresh off the press, making a bright splash in the sunlight. One paper is pulled forward from the pile to show two front-page photographs: in one, a young person holds a child or a doll; in the other, the figure in the rear, apparently a police officer, salutes the figure in the foreground, whose attire suggests someone you have to salute.

Competing for attention with the seated man, a glamorous young woman looks out with a come-on smile from the cover of *Look*, also in bright sunlight just below the papers. “Look,” the cover commands, and we do. It's perhaps a bit too obvious, the contrast between the glamour shot of the cover girl, the news photos in the papers, and the unvarnished old man, a contrast among three kinds of photography: one (commercial magazines) pandering to soft erotic fantasy, another seeking to catch the eye with visual counterparts to written news, and another, the photography represented by this picture itself—FSA

documentary realism—that takes the world as it is and tries to make it clear.

But what's quotidian can also be inexplicable. Look as closely as we can at and into this scene captured by Vachon's camera, we cannot tell for certain what goes on here, what happens before our eyes. Is the old man proprietor of the newsstand, customer, or visitor? Whose hand hides in the recesses of the stand, and what's the meaning of its gesture? Does the dark, ragged-edged shadow along the right side of the picture, bordering a dagger-like wedge of intense September brightness, have a meaning, a role to play in the story unfolding or already past in this enigmatic vision at the heart of the Minneapolis tenderloin?

What is being documented here? An unremarkable event, mystifying in some ways and perhaps even mysterious, it's something we might have noticed casually had we chanced to pass by at just that moment. A sight snapped and fixed from the flux of time and delivered to our eyes without further comment than the terse caption: “Newsstand, Gateway District, Minneapolis, Minnesota. September 1939.” Vachon's picture, in fact, can be taken as a statement of a theory of photography, a photography that shows everything there is to show but with something untranslatable left over. The picture is steeped in implication spoken and unspoken: a newsstand on a major-city crossroads of hard luck and abandoned hope.

In this unlikely site, modern culture appears: newspapers and magazines printed elsewhere with words and images from distant places recounting events probably of profound indifference to what we see before our eyes. The newsstand is revealed as the nexus of rather staggering contradictions. In the end, culture is what the picture is about. Appropriating the “look” of photography, commercial culture spreads tawdriness as the look of the real. The FSA camera does its work by making such contradictions visible and conscious. Mystery suffuses the commonplace image; secrets of hidden places, what we cannot know for certain, empower the image and give the lie to the photography of fantasy, distraction, and escape.



FIGURE 1 (ABOVE) John Vachon,
“Newsstand, Gateway District,
Minneapolis, Minnesota,”
September 1939



FIGURE 2 (LEFT) Russell Lee,
“Residents of Northome,
Minnesota,” September 1937

The new popularity of the camera as “the central instrument of our time,” in James Agee’s words,⁸ testified to a hope and a need in the face of the collapse of confidence during the Thirties. Along with material casualties—no job, no pay, no food, old clothes, worn-out shoes, broken-down jalopies—a less visible consequence of the crash was the erosion of belief in commercial portrayals on billboards and magazine covers. There was anger but also a yearning for a *return* to something traditional that, paradoxically, went hand in hand with desire for change and protest against the present organization of things. With its physical connection to the “real world,” to fact over fantasy, the camera seemed a perfect instrument for discovery and recovery of the lost world of the older, “real” America, the America of firm footing and stable sense of place. For Roy Stryker and countless others, this meant the America of the small town.

Of course, small town was like apple pie and mother, an overworked cliché of politicians, preachers, and other hucksters. For Stryker, a fervent believer in what he insisted was the reality at the core of traditional America, the small town grounded all hope and confidence that the practical politics of the New Deal would produce a better world. His FSA project was the opportunity to apply the instrument of the camera to this end, and its primary means was to bring the idea and ideal of “Small Town America” into focus.

“The small town,” Stryker wrote in a publicity release early in the project, “is the cross-roads where the land meets the city, where the farm meets commerce and industry. It is the contact point where men of the land keep in touch with a civilization based on mass-produced, city-made gadgets, machines, canned movies and canned beef.”⁹ The figurative language here reveals Stryker’s small town as an imaginative construct, a fiction or myth of enduring power even in the face of countervailing facts. “Cross-roads” and “contact point” imply a middle landscape between land and city, farm and factory—a place in the imagination where opposites can be mediated without having to confront hard choices and intransigent conflicts.

One problem with imaginary middle landscapes is their vulnerability to internal imbalance. Opposition and instability seem always on the horizon. Yet desire for balance, for a vital center, cannot afford to abate. Stryker asked FSA photographers to carry a copy of his press release along with a general small-town shooting script (ice-cream parlors, courthouses, post offices, squares,

movies, fire hydrants, traffic signals, hitching posts, and so on), for small town is “a perennial rather than a special assignment.” Perennial means springing anew, like a growing plant. Yet by the late 1930s had not the balance already tipped?

The wording of Stryker’s shooting script points to another gap in the desired vision: a “thorough country-wide picture of the American institution SMALL-TOWN is bound to illustrate regional differences,” but “at the same time, it is sure to accentuate similarities of a national rather than a regional character.” *National* clearly means cities, factories, railroads, highways, mass communication—all of which spell trouble for the imagined and imaginary small town on which Stryker and others founded hope for a revived nation: a *national* middle landscape of harmonious rapport between past and present, human settlement and natural setting. With the camera and the FSA commitment, Stryker wrote, “*We introduced Americans to America.*”¹⁰

Still, in many cases FSA photographs of Minnesota small towns tell a less rosy, more nuanced and ambiguous story. In Russell Lee’s September 1937 picture (fig. 2), four residents of Northome in the cutover region of northern Minnesota gather by a gas pump—ghost of the erstwhile town pump—in front of the local Fairway market (a branch of a national chain?). They face toward each other in what might be a habitual pattern; the two women, who may be mother and daughter to judge by the resemblance of mouths and chins, stand side-by-side, the younger woman touching a hand to the older woman’s coat, a gesture perhaps of protection or of restraint, or simply to steady herself. The two men stand at right angles to the camera, facing each other, both with hands in pockets, their heads capped with the ubiquitous emblem of male solidarity and correctness, the 1930s snap-brim hat. The one who ignores the camera (or pretends to), his eyes straight ahead, continues to suck happily (one presumes) on his pipe.

What is this all about? What is happening here? What is the *here* in the first place—what sort of space do we enter with our eyes, so obviously not welcomed by the standing residents? Not a town square, not an open market, but the paved space that doubles as a gas station in front of a market. We glimpse advertisements for products that disclose a national network coming to a still point in this remote and depressed area where greed

The picture makes social relations visible, yet they remain merely traces of uncertain things.

for converting forests into lumber, trees into sheets of wood, had already depleted one of the state's once-grand natural resources. The space has a provisional look; it's a place to stop, store up, fuel up, and be on your way—unless a nosy photographer asks you to stop and look his way for a minute. It's as if there were no there there. The relation of the people to this place remains unclear; they are not carrying shopping bags, nor is there a sign of an automobile. What is being shown, then, seems an impenetrable scene, an obscurity deepened by the curiously asymmetrical structure of the picture. The plate-glass window on the right with gilt letters spelling out "C. A. Peterson" reflects another, quite different set of images, along with another human presence dimly visible: a man in shirtsleeves at the very right edge of the frame, apparently busy behind a counter. Is this Mr. Peterson, and is he local proprietor of this Fairway branch?

The picture makes social relations visible, yet they remain merely traces of uncertain things, much like the reflections of the distant line of trees, the only hint of land reflected on the large window (as if it were the ground glass of a camera) that bears a name and leaves us guessing about the rest. This picture brings up another of Lee's Northome images from the same trip (fig. 3): the shocking rawness of the town's main street with its stark storefronts, handful of cars, and the strangely intrusive shadow of the church spire. Analogous to the reflections in Peterson's plate-glass window, it drops into the scene like an alien, dead hand without sound—perhaps a judgment, perhaps only the cruel indifference of the glaring sun.

Ironies of change seem to taunt Minnesota small towns in the FSA file. John Vachon pictures what seems a thriving main street of Hibbing (fig. 4), but when we put this image next to other of his Hibbing pictures, we learn that the built-up town is steadily giving way to an expanding open-pit mine, the largest in the world (fig. 5). A movie theatre sits about halfway down the street, along with other signs of commercial enterprise suggesting a shift in balance, even above ground, between regional and national identity. The commentary on imbalances between rural and urban, land and fac-

tory, local and national seems dire and foreboding in Arthur Rothstein's "Railroad Station, Farmington, Minnesota" (fig. 6), with its industrial imagery of boxcar, telephone wires, and railroad-signal stanchion. In another of his pictures, "Running milk cans through sterilizing machine," a worker's misshapen left hand hangs as an eerie emblem of the human costs of mechanization. In Russell Lee's "Former bank now a saloon, Mizpah" of August 1937 (fig. 7), bright, sunlit streets disguise the lurking cultural darkness projected by the caption and the shadow falling from the hanging sign. Lee's photograph charges with irony the biblical name of this desolate place: Mizpah, a city in Gilead, meaning watchtower or lookout or emotional bond between separated people. The name invests the image all the more with hints of warning, another challenge to greatness posed by the crash and its consequences.

Roy Stryker remarked in 1973 that "the full effect" of the photography project "was that it helped connect one generation's image of itself with the reality of its time in history."¹¹ How much of an effect, a connection with time and place, actually occurred among the original viewers of the images is hard to know. Did the photographs make them aware of themselves as a generation with a common history and a common call to greatness? Doubtless there were unrecorded shocks of recognition as people encountered the images in picture sections of newspapers, in the new picture magazines, in photographic annuals, and in a new sort of book that emerged in the 1930s combining pictures and text, such as Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* (1938) and Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town* (1940). It was not until well after World War II that books devoted entirely to FSA photographs began to appear in earnest, perhaps a sign that the generation that experienced the depression and war as young people, now in their prime or declining years, wished to reconnect with memories of what they had survived, what history had to offer in the way of hard times and war times.

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FIGURE 3 (LEFT) Russell Lee, "Main Street of Northome, Minnesota," September 1937

FIGURE 4 (BELOW) John Vachon, "Main Street of Hibbing, Minnesota," August 1941

FIGURE 5 (FACING PAGE) John Vachon, "One end of the Hull-Rust-Mahoning pit, the largest open-pit iron mine in the world. The pit is two and one-half miles long, three-fourths mile wide, and about four hundred feet deep. Hibbing (vicinity)," August 1941



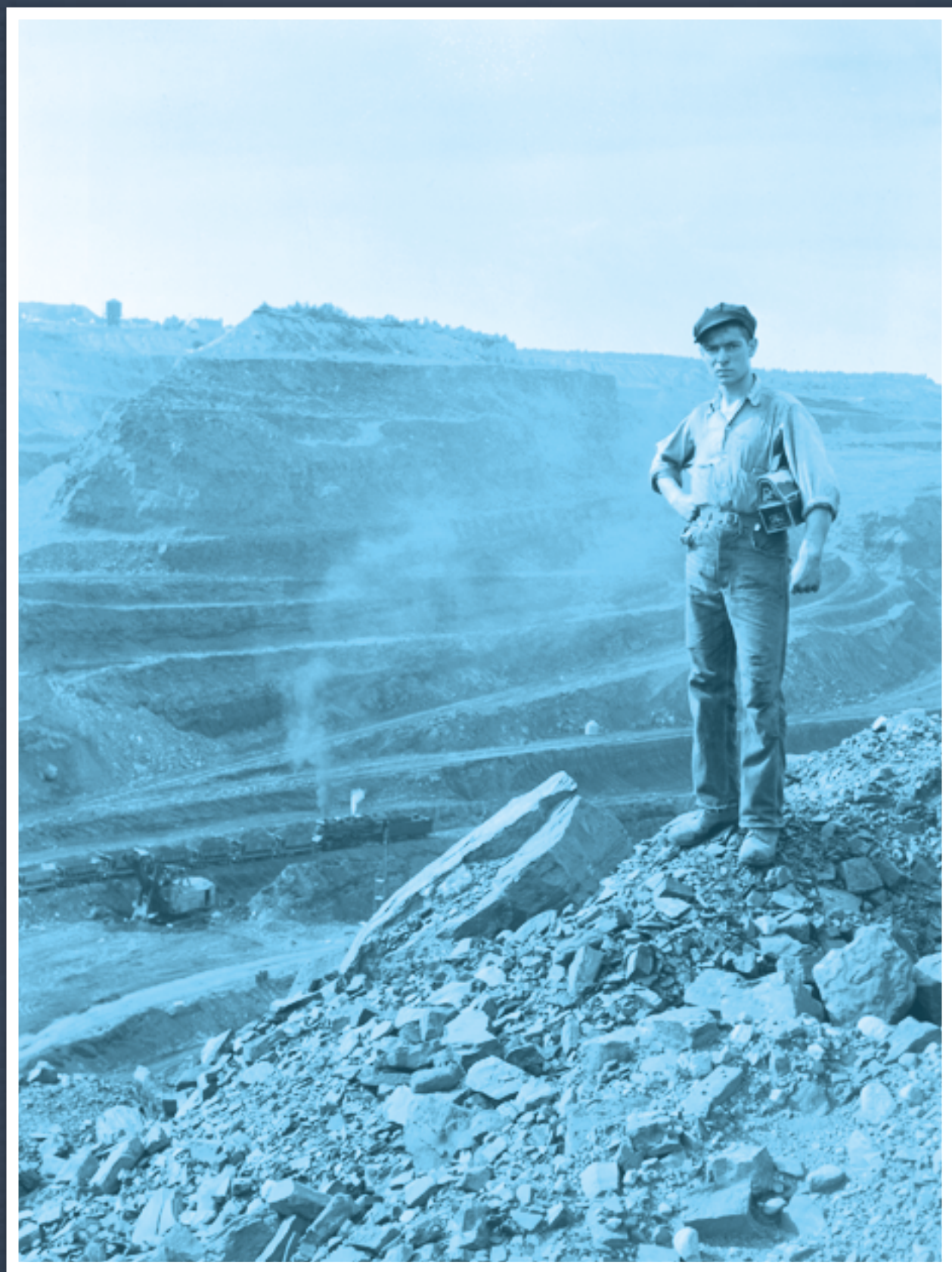




FIGURE 6 (LEFT) Arthur Rothstein,
"Railroad Station, Farmington,
Minnesota," September 1939

FIGURE 7 (BELOW) Russell Lee,
"Former bank now a saloon,
Mizpah, Minnesota," August 1937



To call some pictures negative and others positive misconstrues and distorts the goal of the FSA project.

In the 1980s a number of books appeared with FSA pictures of particular states: Ohio, Mississippi, Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota.¹² Pride in state has not been a significant fact of national life for a very long time, at least since the Civil War—except perhaps at times of close national elections—but if any state can be said to have an “exceptionalist” view of itself, it is probably Minnesota. Robert Reid remarks in *Picturing Minnesota* that while we see the familiar depression poverty, grubby downtown streets, abandoned buildings, harsh landscapes, and occasional destitution, the book has relatively few signs of the usual Thirties sullen desperation. The mood seems more stoical than tragic, even smiling and cheerful. Is it something ethnic, northern European, Native American? Are Minnesotans more resolute than others in face of hardship? Do they work harder on their farms, in their factories, grain elevators, beet and onion fields, open-pit mines, dairies and creameries? Are they truly the heirs of Paul Bunyan (fig. 8)?

John Vachon's picture, shown on the cover of *Picturing Minnesota*, sets the tone: a young boy making a funny face for the camera, the tip of his tongue licking his upper lip, his narrowed eyes betraying how much he coyly enjoys himself (fig. 9). He stands against an unpainted, wide-planked wall next to the barn door, and by his right shoulder is a 1940 Minnesota automobile license plate, a souvenir of state pride. Vachon made this picture in February 1942, a couple of months after Pearl Harbor. “I was supposed to show that this was a great country,” he wrote later about his OWI assignments in 1942. “I was finding out it really was.” This picture is from the far northern “sparsely populated” cutover region, “still least affected by the war. I didn't know it at the time, but I was having a last look at America as it used to be.”¹³

To distinguish among pictures—to call some negative and others positive—misconstrues and distorts the goal of the FSA project, which was, in Stryker's words, chiefly to show the country to itself. The aim was to take stock, make an inventory of scenes and things in which “America” could be said to inhere. The file strives to embody national self-consciousness, to be

the repository of self-knowledge. If *Picturing Minnesota* shows few signs of the bad days of 1934, nevertheless there are indications that militant trade unionism, class warfare, and agitation for radical change did leave traces in the decade and remained as part of the Minnesota scene and outlook.

Vachon's pictures are particularly sensitive to such signs: a lone striker determinedly bears her message: “Unfair” (fig. 10); the explosive word “Union” shouts from a wall in a railroad yard where two workers take a breather on a bench (fig. 11); a miner with a rough-and-ready look about him and a torn shirt sits jauntily, as if on a dare, astride a powder keg (fig. 12). In “Abandoned factory” (fig. 13), Vachon shows loss, brokenness, and darkness within against shining sunlight outside. With only the picture as evidence, we ask all the more urgently: What sort of calamity has happened here?

Similarly, why the air of sadness in Vachon's 1942 picture, “Music supplied by two Meeker County farmers for dance at crossroads store”? Both faces imply concentration and inwardness (fig. 14); perhaps music at a country dance is always a touch sad. The mood seems intensely private and ruminative, as dark as the darkness beyond the windowpane that frames the front head. “Crossroads” in the caption echoes Stryker's “American small town”; perhaps the picture shows the small town through its musicians, staring at its own fragility. Are these men symbolic Orpheus figures—one staring blankly, the other with eyes shut—who have been to the underworld and just returned with the bad, sad news of 1942?

How city and country stand toward or cross each other is one of the grand subjects of the FSA-OWI file. Stryker's scripts encouraged photographers to keep an eye on processing industries in which agricultural products, vegetables, meat, and milk are transformed into commodities for consumption, a process that might well be called the urbanization of nature. The entire process can be described as the point of contact between the mechanical and natural, the marketplace serving as invisible agent of change. Vachon's Minnesota

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FIGURE 8 (ABOVE) John Vachon, "Paul Bunyan monument, Bemidji, Minnesota," September, 1939

FIGURE 9 (RIGHT) John Vachon, "Meeker County, Minnesota. One of the McRaith grandchildren," February 1942



FIGURE 10 (BELOW) John Vachon, "Picketing, Minneapolis, Minnesota," September 1939



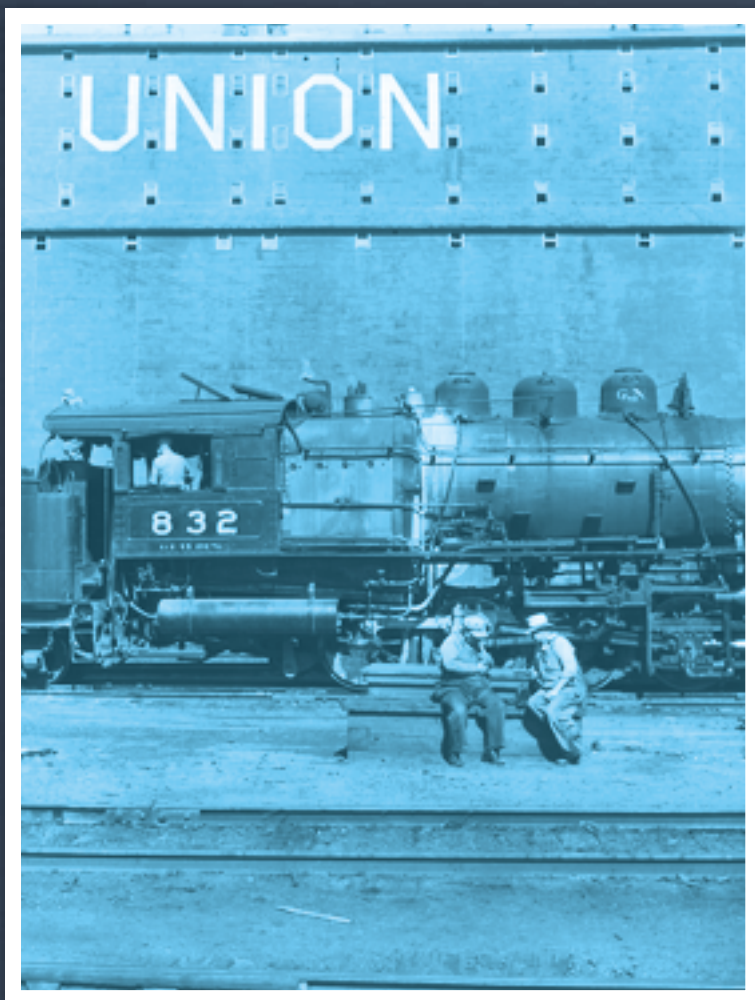


FIGURE 11 (LEFT) John Vachon, "Railroad men at lunch. Grain elevator district, Minneapolis, Minnesota," September 1939

FIGURE 12 (BELOW) John Vachon, "Member of blasting crew at Danube Mine near Bovey, Minnesota," August 1941



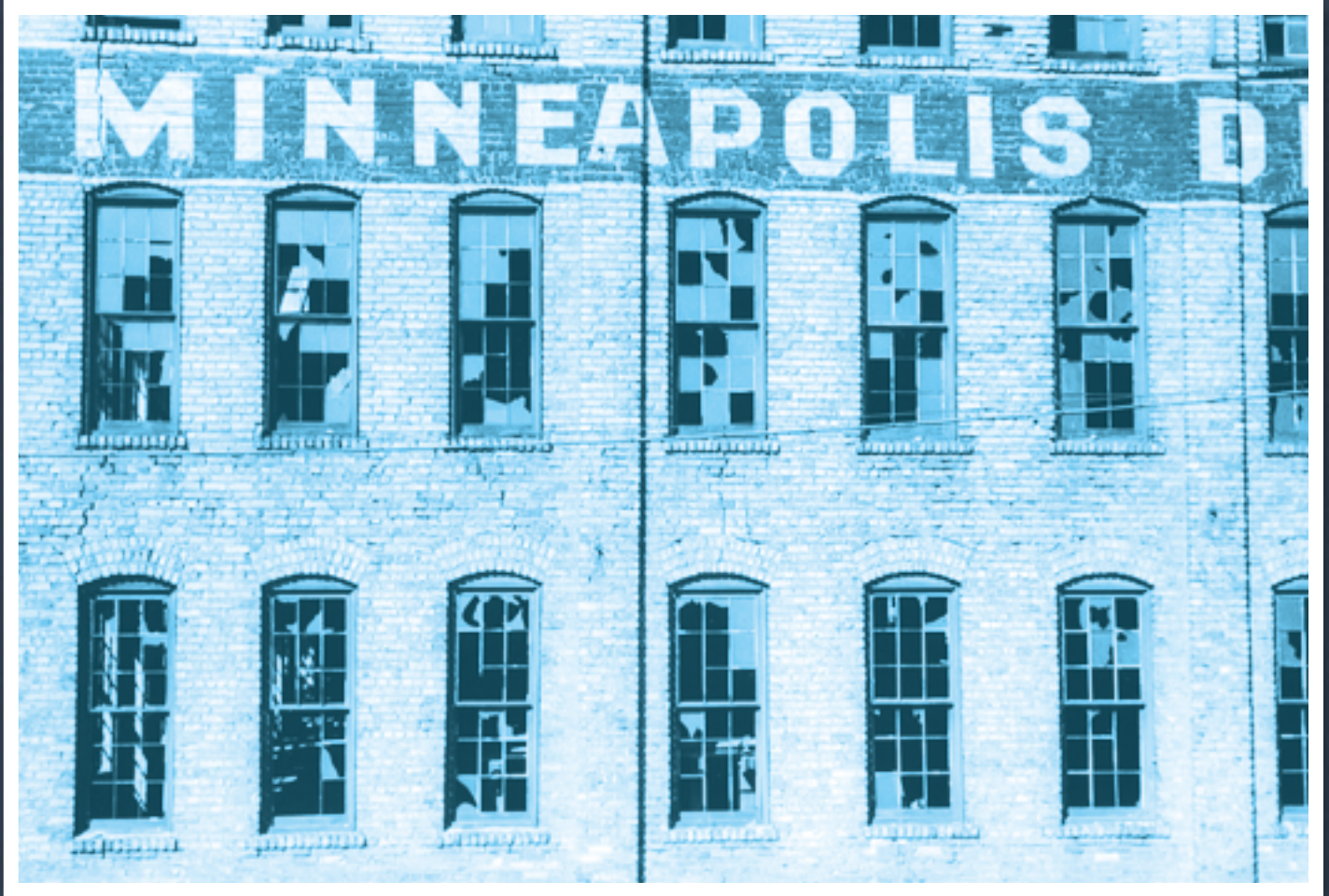


FIGURE 13 John Vachon, "Abandoned factory, Minneapolis, Minnesota," September 1939



FIGURE 14 (ABOVE) John Vachon, "Meeker County, Minnesota. Music supplied by two Meeker County farmers for dance at crossroads store," February 1942



FIGURE 15 (LEFT) John Vachon, "Packing butter cut into squares for use in restaurants. Land O' Lakes plant, Minneapolis, Minnesota," July 1941

pictures include striking examples of raw things being made into food products and shipped to market: packaged butter (fig. 15), bottled milk, finished lumber, packaged bacon. Shifting points of contact and growing imbalance between city and country appear often in his pictures, partly in response to Stryker's suggestions—"More trucks loading and unloading. Minneapolis is still a great distribution point"¹⁴—but also as a result of his own deepening insight into interconnections of the urban-industrial market system.

Vachon first photographed Minneapolis grain elevators in September 1939, apparently drawn to the simplicity, repetitive structure, and grandeur of these stunning functional forms. The great French architect Le Corbusier called them "the magnificent FIRST-FRUIT of the new age."¹⁵ Vachon's pictures include near-abstract views, close up and with tight cropping (fig. 16), but mostly he shows them as working places linked to railroad yards, next to freight cars loading and unloading. One untitled picture (fig. 17) presents a square clump of these great cylindrical forms, eight deep in the midst of a busy railroad yard, placed by the camera to accent their proximity to the Gold Medal flour mill that they supply with grain to be transformed into flour and, hence, money. The scene includes other symbols of money and power: tall buildings of downtown Minneapolis and a bridge bringing traffic (and business) into the city over the Mississippi River. On the same occasion, he photographed the Minneapolis Grain Exchange (figs. 18, 19), where another conversion of grain into gold takes place through buying and selling of futures. Seen as a group, Vachon's grain pictures delineate a system: the conversion of land and crops not into sustenance alone but into mounds of wealth for speculators and corporate enterprises. In this light, the enigmatic "Grain elevator with tar patches" (fig. 20) invites speculation. As a comment on the status of those grand forms as symbols of greatness, do the tar patches stand for cracks, signs of weakness that might some day burst through and bring down the entire structure? Is patching with tar adequate? Is there an allegory lurking here? The pattern of patches resembles an outline of city streets or, perhaps, some forgotten written language. Intriguing to speculate, but the significance of the thick dark smears remains cryptic, which may be their most pregnant meaning.



To view the riches of the FSA-OWI collection, visit the Library of Congress Photographs and Prints catalog: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/fsaabt.html>.

In July 1941, on assignment in Iowa, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, Vachon spent five hours on his own in the Hormel meatpacking plant in Austin, "photographing everything I wanted." The plant photographer thought he had "carte blanc," Vachon wrote to his wife. These are the most astonishing of his Minnesota pictures. Stryker's script had included standard pictures of farm life; he asked for "Portraits of cows and calves also horses," and also "milking for folks who don't know how milking is done." To his wife, Vachon wrote that he would save "the gory story of slaughtering" for later, but "suffice it to say I no longer eat meat." His pictures show the killing of cattle and hogs, their dismemberment, and their packaging for market. As crossroads pictures of the invasion of the machine into the pastoral garden where cows and calves sit for their portraits, these cannot be matched. "Whether the pictures are any good," Vachon confessed to his wife, "I don't know. I was very confused, standing in six inches of purple black blood firing flash bulbs at dismemberment."¹⁶ The grim analogy implied between firing guns and firing flash bulbs scores its point in the tense days of 1941. The pictures (figs. 21–23) hardly need interpretation. "Heads of beef cattle" defies paraphrase. The pastoral cow has become mutilated minotaur, its awful sightless eyes left behind as a judgment not to be forgotten. The mechanization of food production seems prescient of the mechanization of war. Picasso's *Guernica* flashes to mind.

“Something lost, something gained” seems the most apt summation of the Minnesota depicted in the FSA-OWI file. In those years, 1935–1943, the state, like the country as a whole, made its way from crash to partial recovery to regenerative patriotism against a widely despised overseas enemy. As insight into the greatness of the “greatest generation,” the file shows challenges to be overcome and resources available for the task. The photographs themselves stand for one resource almost beyond measure: the courage to see the worst and the best at once. Their work for the project reveals the photographers as prime members of the greatest generation. The FSA-OWI photographs give us the look of the times as perceived and recorded by visual artists devoted to showing the nation to itself. The pictures connect us with times past in our own present tense. By approaching the photographs as a visual experience relevant to our own times and to our sense of historical time, we enter the spirit of the file. Look with eyes wide open.

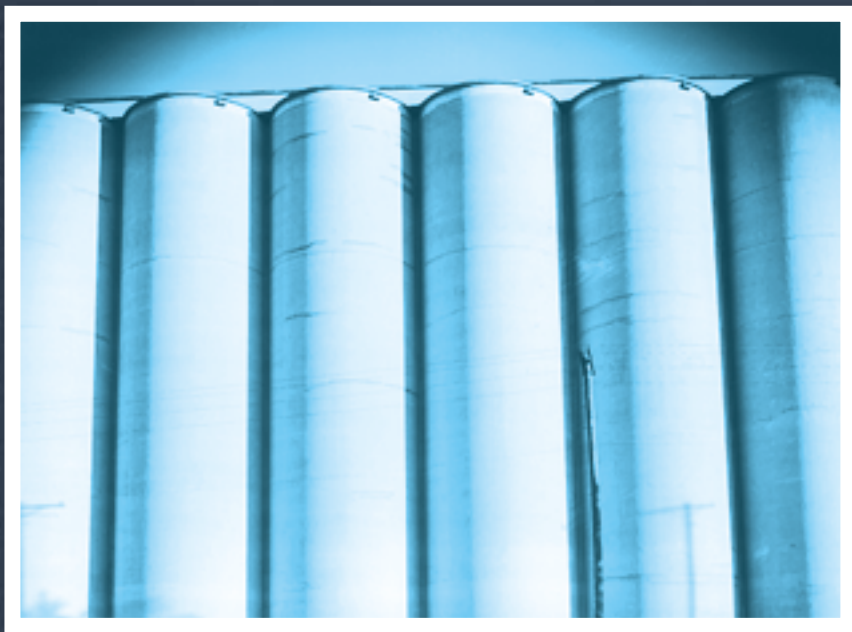


FIGURE 16 (LEFT) John Vachon, "Grain elevators, Minneapolis, Minnesota," September 1939

FIGURE 17 (BELOW) John Vachon, untitled, undated





FIGURE 18 (ABOVE) John Vachon, "Minneapolis Grain Exchange, Minneapolis, Minnesota. This is the largest open grain market in the United States. Here actual samples of grain from freight cars are on the tables. On the other side of this room is the 'pit' where bidding is on future markets." September 1939



FIGURE 19 (LEFT) John Vachon, "Buyer examining oat samples at open market, Minneapolis Grain Exchange, Minnesota," September 1939

FIGURE 20 (FACING PAGE) John Vachon, "Grain elevator with tar patches, Minneapolis, Minnesota," September 1939

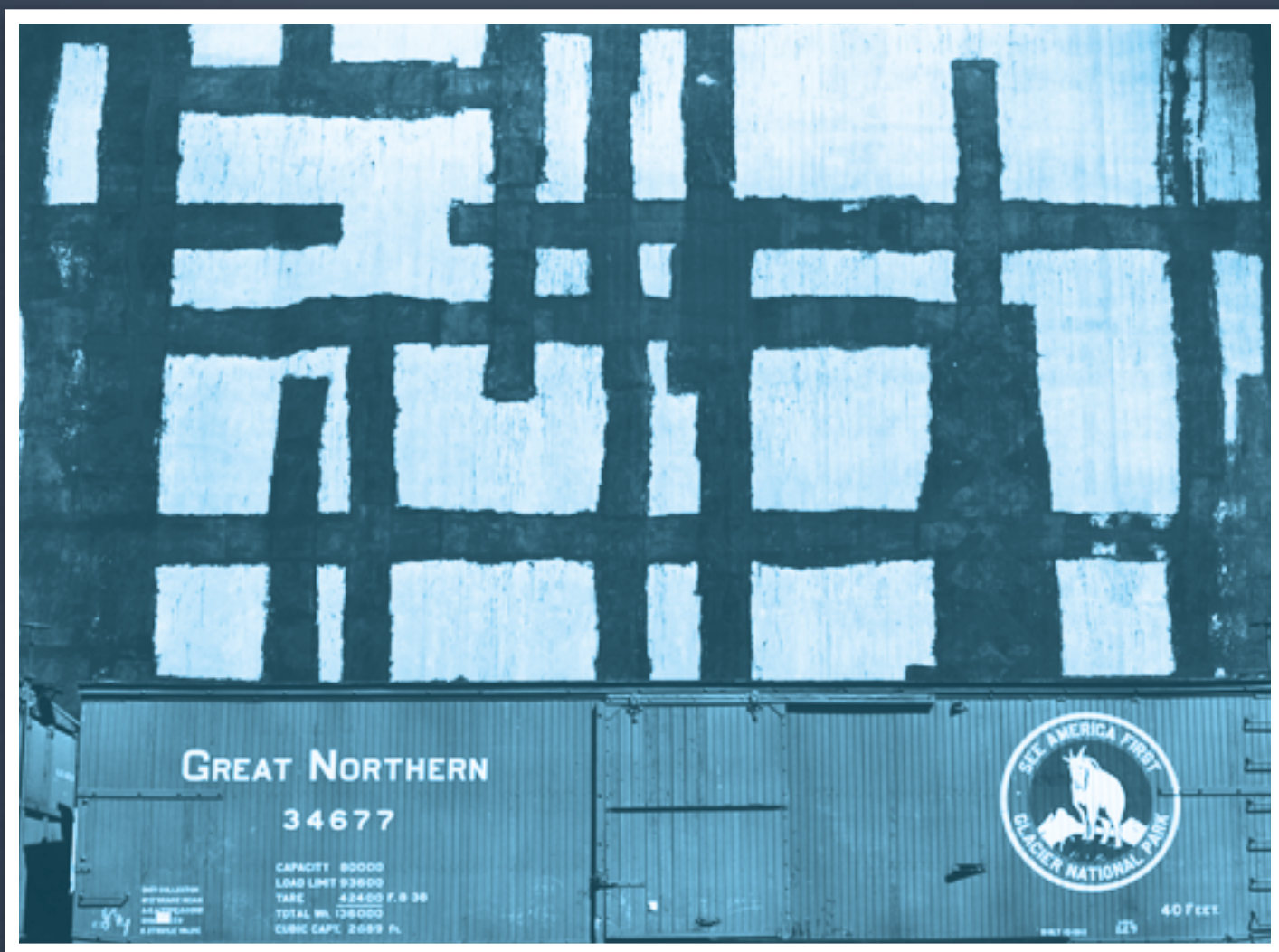




FIGURE 21 John Vachon, "Slitting Throats of Cattle. Packing plant, Austin, Minnesota," July 1941

FIGURE 22 (MIDDLE) John Vachon, "Heads of beef cattle. Packing plant, Austin, Minnesota," July 1941

FIGURE 23 (BOTTOM) John Vachon, "Processing of hog innards. Packing plant, Austin, Minnesota," July 1941



Notes

1. The best introduction to the collection is Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, eds., *Documenting America, 1935–1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 1–13, 330–42. For important critical discussion of the project, see Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 89–132; “The Record Itself”: Farm Security Administration Photography and the Transformation of Rural Life,” in *Official Images: New Deal Photography*, ed. Pete Daniel et al. (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 1–35. For illuminating discussion of FSA work in the emerging culture of photography, see John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 143–93. Also consult Hank O’Neal’s handsome book, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and its People, 1935–1943* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976).

2. Robert L. Reid, ed., *Picturing Minnesota, 1936–1943: Photographs from the Farm Security Administration* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989). For interpretations of cultural responses to the depression, see Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 206–30, 256–90; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 150–83. On “reading” photographs, see Alan Trachtenberg, *Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), 265–98.

3. On the origins, politics, and programs of the FSA, see Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), especially chapters 3–7. On the depression and the efforts of the New Deal, see Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941* (New York: Random House, 1993), 3–50, 170–223; David M. Kennedy, *The American People in the Great Depression: Freedom from Fear, Part One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially chapters 2 and 6.

4. Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935–1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 8. F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972) offers an admiring account of Stryker’s role in shaping FSA photography.

5. Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 521–39, 576–

77; D. Jerome Tweton, *Depression: Minnesota in the Thirties* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1981); Kennedy, *American People*, 294–95. An excellent source of historical and descriptive information is *The WPA Guide to Minnesota* (1938; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985.) This volume is especially useful for its account of cities, towns, and geographical features.

6. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 7.

7. Vachon quoted in Thomas H. Garver, ed., *Just Before the War: Urban America from 1935 to 1941 as Seen by Photographers of the Farm Security Administration* (Balboa, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1968), n. p. On Vachon’s life and work as a photographer, see the excellent introduction in Miles Orvell, ed., *John Vachon’s America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3–36.

8. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 11.

9. Quoted in Orvell, ed., *John Vachon’s America*, 291–92.

10. Orvell, ed., *John Vachon’s America*, 291. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 9: “We succeeded in doing exactly what Rex Tugwell said we should do: We introduced

Americans to America.” Rexford Tugwell, an economist at Columbia University, became part of Roosevelt’s “brain trust” and director of the Resettlement Administration. He appointed Stryker, his assistant at Columbia, head of the photographic project.

11. Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 9.

12. Reid, *Picturing Minnesota*, 9n25.

13. John Vachon, “Tribute to a Man, an Era, an Art,” *Harper’s*, Sept. 1973, p. 99, quoted in Reid, *Picturing Minnesota*, 8.

14. Orvell, ed., *John Vachon’s America*, 300.

15. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (1923; repr., London: Architectural Press, 1970), 33. In *The Face of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), a book of photographs and text that follows elegantly in the tradition of the FSA Minnesota pictures, John Szarkowski cites Le Corbusier and writes (p. 243): “The clean geometric shapes of grain elevators punctuate Minnesota’s horizons from Duluth to the western border and southward to Iowa. At the crossroads are small country elevators with pointed roofs, and in the cities are long banks of concrete cylinders which store billions of bushels.”

16. All quotes in Orvell, ed., *John Vachon’s America*, 182, 299.

All images are from the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.



John Vachon, “Employment agency in the Gateway District, Minneapolis, Minnesota,” September 1939