About the Photographer

Russell Lee was born July 21, 1903, in Ottawa Illinois. Although he was a trained chemical engineer, Lee is best known for his work as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) from 1936-1942. During his time with the FSA, Russell Lee photographed both rural and urban areas of the United States. He crisscrossed the country covering more than 100,000 miles and 27 states. After his career in the FSA, he enlisted in the military, as a captain in the Air Transport Command (ATC). In the ATC he was the head of Still Pictures of the Overseas Technical Unit. With this unit, he helped “photograph the airfields used by the ATC”. Upon retiring from the military, he was awarded the Air Medal for his service and bravery. He then helped with assignments regarding coal mines (1946-1947), and the Standard Oil of New Jersey project (1947 – mid 1950s). He had a brief assignment in Italy for the Texas Observer in 1960. Lee co-directed the University of Missouri’s photo-workshop from 1949 – 1962. He was the first instructor of photography, and known as a well-regarded professor, at the University of Texas from 1956 – 1973. Russell Lee died on August 28, 1986, from cancer.

Farm Security Administration Documentary Photography Project

In 1933, the President of the United States of America, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, began implementing a series of social programs that fell under the umbrella of the New Deal, which were aimed at helping the country climb out of the Great Depression that began in 1929. In 1935 one social program, the Resettlement Administration (RA) began. The goal of the Resettlement Administration was land reform, which included both rural and suburban resettlement efforts and rural rehabilitation. A public information program was created to promote the RA’s works. One of the five sections was the photographic or historical section. In 1937 the RA became known as the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In 1942, with the
addition of the United States to the Second World War, the FSA photographers were shifted to work for the Office of War Information. By August 1942, the FSA was disbanded all together. The large collection of negatives, over 170,000 in total, is housed in the Library of Congress in the Prints and Photographs Division. From the very beginning, the photographers hired by the FSA had a clear purpose. They were to document rural America, to visually provide an image of the poverty affecting so many Americans, and to show how the New Deal social programs were alleviating these problems. The idea was to educate politicians and urban Americans about the plight of these people. Early images from the FSA including, “Migrant Mother” by Dorothea Lange and “Farmer and sons...dust storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936” by Arthur Rothstein were just the start of this narrative. This type of photography is known as documentary photography and “All that needs to be said...is that it is a camera record of a living history...”

In 1940, Roy Stryker referenced the FSA photographers’ role in this time period and its impact on documentary photography, “They can become the historians of the present. Simple honesty will give their pictures the dignity of fact; feeling and insight their fraction-of-a-second’s exposure the integrity of truth. And the truth is the objective of the documentary attitude.”

Russell Lee was an integral part of showing this truth, and by his use of a newer technique at the time, flash photography, was able to illuminate the lives of people. The American people were not only given a glimpse at the dry, barren land, but also at the interiors of homes and places of people and their daily activities. Russell’s subjects were able to live their everyday lives in front of a photographic lens, and it does not get more life-like than that. As it has been written about him, “Russell Lee not only continued this documentary tradition, but in many ways, turned it inside out to develop and master a new methodology. Through his effective employment of direct and multiple flash ... Lee profoundly impacted documentary style.”
It is through the lens of Russell Lee, and the other FSA photographers, we are able to look back upon our past as a nation. Locally, we are able to get a glimpse into the lives of our relatives and community during the Great Depression. With Russell Lee’s trip through Polk County, you can see the intense hard work of the migrant workers and the farmer, and how the sugar beet industry has been impacting the area for decades and will continue to impact us for decades to come.

Photograph courtesy The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

**Trip through Polk County**

Early on in his career, Russell Lee, was designated to photograph mostly the Midwestern portion of the country. Roy Stryker entrusted Lee to create his own assignments when needed.

It is in an August 1937 assignment or agenda, Russell Lee mentions Polk County. August 1937 Lee was photographing in northern Minnesota. His goal was to capture the lumber towns in the northeastern portion of the state. At this point, Russell Lee, wrote to Roy Stryker to indicate his next stops on his trip through the upper Midwest. On the list was: “12. Crookston – possible
stranded harvest hands…” This reference to harvest hands corresponds with letters between Russell, Roy and Edwin Locke (assistant chief of the historical division) regarding photographing the sugar beet harvest. In a September 15 letter between Lee and Locke, Lee mentions he will be stopping in: “Little Falls … then will work towards Grand Forks where the beet topping season will have begun and where it will also be possible to get some potato digging pix [sic].”

In a follow up letter later in September, Lee writes to Locke, “Received your wire today and am glad that my suggested program meets with your approval. The first thing I will do is to get the harvest hands in the Red River Valley.” It is around this point we can assume Lee managed to capture the photographs of the sugar beet harvest in the fields of Polk County, the migrant workers and their living conditions, the pictures of the factories, and the potato harvest.

Later that month in a letter dated, September 27, 1937, Stryker wrote to Lee, “Liked you sugar beet work pictures very much. ... I am wondering what luck you had with your beet worker pictures.” This exhibit speaks for the ‘luck’ that Russell Lee had with those pictures.
A Brief History of Sugar Beets in Polk County Minnesota

1913-1954

1913
The Northwest Agricultural Experiment Station tested two varieties of German beet seed, and a few Polk County farmers grew test plots.

1919
Carl Wigand, Polk County farmer, grew a test plot of sugar beets for the Minnesota Sugar Company (MSC), which were shipped to their Chaska, MN plant. MSC began contracts with Polk County farmers.

1923
MSC announced intentions to construct a beet processing plant in East Grand Forks, MN. Red River Sugar Company was established to oversee construction of plant.

1924
MSC, Northern Sugar Corporation, and Red River Sugar Company were sold to American Beet Sugar Company

1925
104 sugarbeet farmers

1926
10,056 acres of sugarbeets harvested

1930
180 sugarbeet farmers

1931
20,394 acres of sugarbeets harvested

Middle 1930's
American Beet Sugar Company and growers in the Red River Valley created the Red River Valley Sugarbeet Association (RRVSGA)

1934
American Beet Sugar Company renamed American Crystal Sugar Company

1940
26,760 acres of sugarbeets harvested

August 28, 1954
American Crystal Sugar dedicates Crookston, MN plant
References Cited:


Roy Stryker Papers, Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville.


Bibliography


