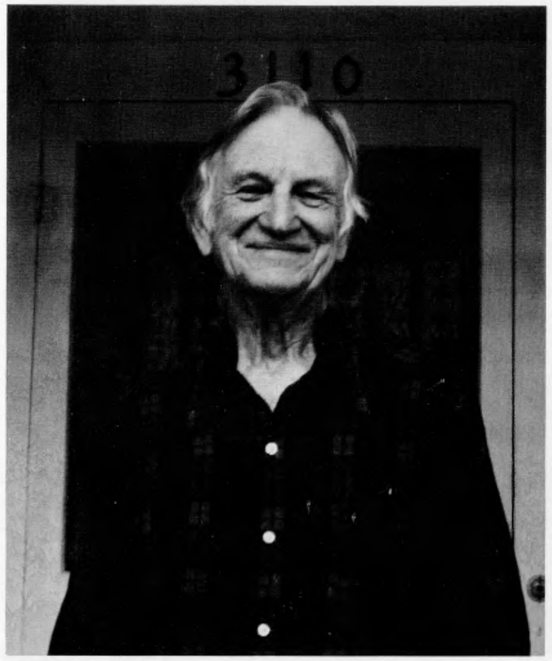
THE Iowan

SPRING ISSUE 1983

A Record of Hard Times in Iowa

The Depression-Era Photographs of Russell Lee

Article by Peter L. Petersen



Russell Lee, March 1982. Peter L. Petersen photo.

When Russell Lee came to Iowa in late 1936, he had been serious about photography as a career for only a year and a half. He could hardly have imagined, as he drove across the state during a cold December day, that within a few years he would be counted among America's greatest photographers. Nor could he have possibly envisaged that the several hundred photographs of Iowa and of Iowans he would take during the next few weeks would become part of what is viewed today as one of the most remarkable achievements in the history of documentary photography.

The trip to Iowa was Lee's first assignment as a government photographer. A few weeks earlier, he had landed a position with the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration, one of the myriad agencies created to fight the Great Depression during the New Deal era of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Resettlement Administration (its name was changed to the Farm Security Administration in 1937) was designed to aid the nation's rural poor — sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and many others.

It was the function of the Historical Section, headed by former Columbia University Professor Roy Emerson Stryker, to record RA/FSA activities. Although not a photographer himself, Stryker believed that photography was the best way to reveal the need for reform and then to record subsequent efforts to correct a situation. Beyond the obvious utilitarian function, Stryker saw an unrivaled opportunity to compile a portrait of America. Never large, even by the modest standards of the 1930s, Stryker's staff of photographers at the time he hired Lee consisted of three people of exceptional talent: Dorothea Lange, who was in California photographing dust bowl refugees and other migrants; Walker Evans covering the deep South; and Arthur Rothstein working in Virginia. This arrangement left a gaping hole in the middle of the country, a hole that Stryker expected Lee to fill.

In many ways, Lee was a logical choice for the Midwest assignment. Born on July 21, 1903, in Ottawa, Illinois, he spent most of his youth in his home state. Following his graduation from Lehigh University with a degree in chemical engineering, he returned to Illinois to work for a company that manufactured roofing materials. Although financially remunerative, the job gave Lee little stimulation or satisfaction. In 1927, he married a rising young painter named Doris Emrick who introduced him to the exciting world of art. For the next few years, Lee struggled to develop his own talents as an artist. Eventually he turned from painting and drawing to photography. He found that the camera, by allowing him to combine scientific training with a keen sense of observation, provided a fascinating way of recording the physical world around him.

(continued on page 18)

The hands of Mrs. Andrew Ostemeyer, the seventy-six-year-old wife of a Woodbury County homesteader, are the subject of this famous (and often imitated) Lee photograph. In his history of the RA/FSA project, Roy Stryker selected this photograph from the nearly 80,000 on file as an example of his staff's respect for human dignity.

Above: *Two children of John Scott, a Ringgold County hired hand. When this photograph was released to the public in April of 1937, an over-eager government publicist, ignoring Lee's original caption, entitled the scene, "A Tenant Madonna," and added, "The sad expression of this young mother's face tells the whole tragic story of tenantry — low income, lack of decent housing, lack of proper food, lack of clothing and furniture." After complaints about government "trickery" surfaced in Iowa newspapers, Roy Stryker wrote to the Des Moines* Register *absolving Lee of blame for the erroneous caption and apologizing to fifteen-year-old Marie Scott and her family.*

Right: *One of Lee's first stops was a livestock auction in Ames. During the summer drought of 1936, a shortage of grain and fodder forced many farmers to sell their livestock.*

Left: *A man reading to fellow residents of the Homeless Men's Bureau in Sioux City. In a journal Lee kept during his Iowa trip, he recorded that this institution at 424 Jones Street housed "295 unattached and destitute men (average age fifty-two) on a daily expenditure of thirty-five cents per person." Lee was particularly interested in the Homeless Men's Bureau — he took fourteen photographs there — because one of the goals of the Resettlement Administration was to slow the flight of farm people to the city.*

Below: *The Glenn Cook family on the porch of their Woodbury County farm home. Like many Iowa farmers in 1936, Cook saw his crops devastated by a long summer drought.*

Opposite, top: *Christmas dinner at the Earl Pauley home near Smithland. One of the most widely reprinted Lee photographs, this scene of four children sharing a meal of potatoes, cabbage, and pie is found in many books and articles about the Great Depression. The Pauley family shared their meager Christmas meal with Lee, who noted that the farmer had a horse, a cow, three pigs, and "eight good-looking children." Pauley's 1936 corn crop had been a total failure, and he owed money to a bank and the local storekeeper. The family had received "no help of any kind since November 22."*

Opposite, bottom: *In this photograph of a pool room wall in the town of Dickens, east of Spencer, Lee captured three symbols of the economic, political, and cultural history of the 1930s — a farm sale advertisement, a Roosevelt poster, and a liquor ordinance.*

(continued from page 14)

Stryker's instructions to Lee were specific and simple: go to Iowa and find evidence that the Depression was adversely affecting farm tenants. After brief stops in Iowa City, Des Moines, and Ames, Lee established his initial headquarters at Spencer, where, with guidance from local Resettlement Administration personnel, he soon began taking photographs. From the beginning, he had little difficulty in finding graphic testimony to the fact that many Iowans were suffering hard times. The vagaries of weather — 1936 brought drought to much of the Midwest — had combined with the prolonged economic slump to push many families to the edge of ruin.

"Here were people on Midwestern farms, the most productive in the country," Lee recalled in a 1982 interview, "living in these conditions. No food to eat. Depending upon hand-outs from the government. My God! Iowa and Illinois farms were noted for their productivity. It was hard to believe."

During the next few weeks, Lee roamed the drought and depression-wracked western part of the state, moving from Spencer to Sioux City, and eventually on to Ringgold County in southern Iowa. He photographed farm buildings in need of repair, badly eroded fields, livestock auctions, and scores of other subjects. Most of his photographs, however, were of people — especially the poor and downtrodden. It is these photos that clearly indicate what has been called Lee's "compassionate heart." When meshed with his artistic and scientific skills, his respect for the dignity of the individual resulted in some extraordinary visual images of the Depression. If Stryker ever had any doubts about his new photographer, the negatives Lee sent back to Washington from Iowa quickly removed them.

In late January, at Stryker's request, Lee hurried eastward to cover a series of floods in Illinois and Indiana; he would never return to Iowa. During the next few years, several other RA/FSA photographers came to the state, and hundreds of their photographs, many recording Iowa's bounty as well as its misery, went into "the file" along with those of Russell Lee. The nearly eighty thousand prints and two hundred thousand unprinted negatives detailing life in every section of the United States are now housed in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress in Washington. Considered a "national treasure," the "FSA file" is one of the most famous and widely used photographic collections in the world.

Lee continued to work for the Farm Security Administration until its demise during World War II. After a brief stint with the Office of War Information, he joined the Army Air Force, serving as an aerial photographer for the Air Transport Command in China and the Near East. Soon after his return to civilian life, he made an impressive photographic survey of health and living conditions among bituminous coal miners. During the next few years, he worked extensively in private industry, his photos appearing in scores of publications, including *Fortune*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *The Lamp*.

From 1949 to 1962 he served as director of the University of Missouri's Photo-Workshop. He spent several weeks in 1960 in Italy on assignment from the prestigious *Texas Quarterly*. One hundred and fifty of Lee's photographs appeared in the September 1961 issue of the publication under the subtitle of "The Image of Italy." In 1965, at the age of sixty-two, Lee began teaching photography at the University of Texas, and, until his retirement eight years later, he devoted most of his time to the classroom. Now approaching his eightieth birthday, Russell Lee and his second wife, Jean, live near the University of Texas campus in Austin.

Whether Lee's career as a photographer would have turned out differently had he not been sent to Iowa in 1936 is, of course, impossible to determine. But perhaps it is significant that, when New York's Whitney Museum of American Art recently published a book on *American Photography*, the two photos selected for publication from the thousands Russell Lee took over a span of more than forty years were from his Iowa assignment.

Peter L. Petersen, who grew up in western Iowa during the Great Depression, is a history professor at West Texas State University in Canyon, Texas. Russell Lee photographs from the FSA File, Library of Congress.

Selected bibliography for additional reading about Russell Lee and the work of other RA/FSA photographers:

Hurley, F. Jack, *Russell Lee, Photographer*, (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Morgan & Morgan, 1978)

_____, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1972)

Stryker, Roy and Nancy Wood, *In this Proud Land: America 1935-1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973)

O'Neal, Hank, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and its People, 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976)