

Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" Photographs in the Farm Security Administration Collection: An Overview

The photograph that has become known as "Migrant Mother" is one of a series of photographs that Dorothea Lange made of Florence Owens Thompson and her children in February or March of 1936 in Nipomo, California. Lange was concluding a month's trip photographing migratory farm labor around the state for what was then the Resettlement Administration. In 1960, Lange gave this account of the experience:

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it. (From: *Popular Photography*, Feb. 1960).

The images were made using a Graflex camera. The original negatives are 4x5" film. It is not possible to determine on the basis of the negative numbers (which were assigned later at the Resettlement Administration) the order in which the photographs were taken.

There are no known restrictions on the use of Lange's "Migrant Mother" images. A rights statement for the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information black-and-white negatives is available online at: http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/res/071_fsab.html.

Images in the series are as follows (select the small image to view larger versions through the Prints & Photographs Online Catalog):

1.) Reproduction number: LC-USF34-9058-C (film negative)
Caption: "Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children. February 1936." (retouched version)
Location: FSA/OWI - J339168 (the original photographic print has been replaced by a copy print) (Also available on microfilm and microfiche: Microfilm LOT 344; Chadwyck-Healey Far West fiche #29:E11.)

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1a.) Reproduction number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-12883 (digital file from print); LC-USZ62-95653 (film copy negative)

Caption: "Destitute peapickers in California ..."

Location: LOT 997

Note: This is an unretouched version of the image listed in #1. This version of the image shows a thumb in the immediate foreground on the right side.



2.) Reproduction number: LC-USF34-9093-C (film negative)

Caption: "Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute."

Location: FSA/OWI - J355. (Also available on microfilm and microfiche: Microfilm LOT 344; Chadwyck-Healey Far West fiche #32:A-8.)

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3.) Reproduction number: LC-USF34-9095 (film negative)

Caption: "Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven children without food. Mother aged 32, father is a native Californian. March 1936."

Location: FSA/OWI - J355. (Also available on microfilm and microfiche: Microfilm LOT 344; Chadwyck-Healey Far West fiche #32:A-9.)

[\[view catalog record\]](#)



4.) Reproduction number: LC-USF34-9097-C (film negative)

Caption: "Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32. Father is a native Californian."

Location: FSA/OWI - J361. (Also available on microfilm and microfiche: Microfilm LOT 344; Chadwyck-Healey Far West fiche #33:A-7.)

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5.) Reproduction number: LC-USZ62-58355 (film copy negative)

(Note: Original negative was declared missing; original negative number was: LC- USF34-9098-C.)

Caption: "Nipomo, Calif. March 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children and their mother, aged 32. The father is a native Californian."

Location: FSA/OWI - J355. (Also available on microfilm and microfiche: Microfilm LOT 344; Chadwyck-Healey Far West fiche #32:A-10).

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Note: A sixth image that shows the mother and children in the tent, taken at a medium range and from an angle, was apparently never received by the Library of Congress. It was featured in an article by Lange's husband, Paul Taylor, in *American West* (May 1970) 7:44. A print of this image may be found in the [Dorothea Lange Archive](#), Oakland Museum, 1000 Oak Street, Oakland, CA, 94607.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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Contemporary Publications in Which "Migrant Mother" Wa