

# **PICTURING FAITH**



# **P I C T U R I N G   F A I T H**

photography and the great depression

**C O L L E E N   M C D A N N E L L**

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Frontispiece: John Vachon, truck of an itinerant preacher parked in front of the U.S. Capitol. Washington, D.C., July 1939 (LC-USF34-060110-D).

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To my parents,  
Kenneth A. McDannell and Margaret Mary McDannell,  
who were there.



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# **P I C T U R I N G   F A I T H**



1.1 Dorothea Lange, *Revival Mother*, woman praying at Victory Through Christ Society Sunday morning worship service in a garage. Dos Palos, California, June 1938 (LC-USF34-018216-E)

# 1

## Introducing Americans to America



■ saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet,” Dorothea Lange remembered years later. “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 32. 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.” Dorothea Lange took many pictures that chilly spring of 1936. She was concluding a monthlong trip photographing migratory farm labor in California for the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration. In the short term, Lange’s photographs did aid the migrant workers. Lange took the pictures to an editor she knew at the *San*



1.2 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, destitute pea picker with three of her seven children. Nipomo, California, March 1936 (LC-USF34-009058-C)

*San Francisco News*, he contacted local relief agencies, and food was dispatched to the starving pea pickers. He also agreed to print several of the photographs in the newspaper: “What Does the ‘New Deal’ Mean to This Mother and Her Children?” read the headline on one article.<sup>1</sup>

One of the photographs that Dorothea Lange took of the California pea pickers has become an icon of the Great Depression (fig. 1.2). Called *Migrant Mother*, it has been reproduced countless times in newspapers, magazines, scholarly monographs, photography books, and college textbooks. Like the *Mona Lisa*, it is a classic portrait; it has been used to summarize both the reality of human tragedy and the imprecise nature of visual images. Certainly *Migrant Mother* appears whenever the discussion turns to how the federal government sent out photographers to document the suffering of innocent people during the Great Depression. The picture is used to introduce the artistry of Dorothea Lange and the other talented photographers who worked to establish documentary photography in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In June 1938 Dorothea Lange took more pictures of migrants in California. Two were of a prayer service of the Victory Through Christ Society. Lange did not merely make the photographs, she took the time to describe what she saw. Her captions explain that the “Sunday

morning revival” met in a garage in Dos Palos, California (see fig. 1.1). In one photograph a woman is prominent in the picture and stands with her hands outstretched. Lange quotes her as testifying, “He’s such a wonderful savior, Glory to God. I’m so glad I came to home. Praise God. His love is so wonderful. He’s coming soon. I want to praise the Lord for what he is to me. He saved me one time and filled me with the Holy Ghost. Hallalulah! He will fill your heart today with overflowing. Bless His Holy name.”<sup>3</sup> The care in which Lange preserved the woman’s image and testimony indicates that the photographer was struck by the intensity of spirit she found in a California garage. Lange had happened on a Sunday prayer service led by a Pentecostal woman preacher. She may have been leading the prayers of women in a separate area, or she may have organized her own small congregation of which we see only the women.

Lange had been photographing refugees from Oklahoma and Texas who had come west for the harvest. Her primary photographic goal was to document migrant suffering: crowds waiting for relief checks, families traveling in overpacked cars, tent camps, and the strenuous work of picking vegetables and fruit. While backbreaking labor certainly dominated migrant life, Lange also managed to photograph another life in California: a couple singing hymns inside their tent, a group of children attending an outdoor Sunday school, a wooden church, and a bus with a “Jesus Saves” sign. These photographs of Dorothea Lange do not have the classic status of *Migrant Mother*, and they have seldom been seen. They, and other photographs of religious practices, are not part of our mental image of the Depression.

*Migrant Mother* was initially distributed in order to elicit sympathy for the California migrants and thus gain popular support for New Deal agricultural reforms. Eventually through sheer visual repetition, it came to summarize the insecurities of the Great Depression and the power of documentary photography. Lange’s other photograph, which we can call *Revival Mother*, presents a different perspective on the era. Unlike *Migrant Mother*, the strength and independence of *Revival Mother* does not stimulate pity. Lange photographed *Revival Mother* wearing her Sunday best, hat and all, and appearing confident in her religious rapture. *Revival Mother* is experiencing something that separates her from other mothers; her ecstasy connects her to something fundamentally different from Dust Bowl poverty. She stands apart from her community, rather than being tightly framed by her children. *Revival Mother* may not even be a mother. Calling upon biblical imagery to help interpret the photograph, she looks more like the independent New Testament women of Corinth condemned for speaking in church rather than the humble Virgin Mary (see 1 Cor 14:34–37). *Revival Mother*’s full attention is directed toward her God; not out toward an uncertain future or inward toward her children. What could the New Deal add to what this woman is already receiving?

These two photographs by Dorothea Lange, one a familiar icon and the other unknown, are among the approximately 164,000 black-and-white negatives now preserved by the Library of Congress. Between 1935 and 1943 the federal government spent almost one million dollars creating such pictures. Under the auspices first of the Resettlement Administration, then of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and finally of the Office of War Information (OWI), “Historical Section” photographers traveled across the country making a visual record of the impact on the American people of the Depression, and eventually the Second World War. The director of the project, Roy E. Stryker, hired (and sometimes fired) more than twenty photographers. Many of those photographers — Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Carl Mydans,

Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, Jack Delano, Edwin Rosskam, Marion Post Wolcott, John Collier, Jr., John Vachon, Gordon Parks — continued to shape documentary photography after their government service was over. Filing cabinets in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress store 107,000 prints made from their original negatives, as well as reels of the microfilmed lots of the photographs. Almost all of the images are also available online.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the images are well-known: photographs of a woman's gnarled hands, of a man and boy running in a dust storm, of a girl with a vacant stare — these have become a part of our mental image of the Depression. The coffee table books of recent years continue to present a set of familiar images: Americans struggle to earn a living on inhospitable land, they enjoy modern entertainments, they have families, they build, they reform. What we have not seen are pictures like *Revival Mother*. Occasionally a few wooden churches are reproduced to evoke nostalgia for the past, but these speak more to the beauty of vernacular architecture than to the faith commitments of their builders. When the rare religious practice is included, no explanation accompanies it, as the picture is assumed to “speak for itself.” The visual image built from the photographic file presents America as decidedly secular.

It is my intention to challenge the legitimacy of that conclusion and to insist that photographs like *Revival Mother* were an integral aspect of the documentary project undertaken by the Farm Security Administration and later by the Office of War Information. Roy Stryker told his photographers to include pictures of religious life, and they complied. They photographed women singing hymns before meetings, the shrines of Mexican farm workers, and African-American children dressed in choir robes. The everyday lives of Utah Mormons and Pennsylvania Mennonites are portrayed, along with praying New York Catholics and Texas Methodists. The FSA/OWI file includes photographs of “God Bless Our Home” prints and Jewish religious goods stores. It illustrates how Americans went to outdoor baptisms, built adobe churches, sent their boys and girls to Hebrew School, and traveled in “Gospel cars.” *Revival Mother* is only one of hundreds of photographs that give us an unprecedented glimpse into the religious world of everyday people.

While many Americans of the thirties and forties were religious, others were not. The thirties were also a profoundly secular period of American history. Roy Stryker and his photographers were among the “unchurched” of America. Raised as Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, as adults they criticized organized religion and did not participate in its rituals. Stryker and his photographers understood themselves to be modern, progressive people who valued open inquiry, freedom, flexibility, democracy, change, and individuality. They were humanists who demanded social and economic justice. From their perspective, religious communities frequently worked against those goals. The richness of the file indicates, however, that in spite of their secular orientation they were drawn to religious expressions. Stryker had been raised in a Protestant family, and he understood the importance of religion for many Americans. People expressed their creativity and innovation, as well as their faith, in their sacred spaces and rituals. As artists, the photographers recognized the beauty of religious buildings and the drama of pious practices. As reformers, Stryker and his team respected the ways that congregations flourished within a context of overwhelming economic crisis and social change. As propagandists, they acknowledged that “freedom of religion” was something that people were

willing to fight a war over. And yet their correspondence reminds us that they also understood religious people to be unpredictable, patronizing, and authoritarian. *Picturing Faith* tells the story of how a set of photographers—who were not themselves religious—saw religion in the United States.

*Picturing Faith* is thus more than a visual story of religion in America. Stryker and the photographers focused on certain aspects of faith and ignored others. Their “eyes” were shaped by their own personal biographies, their understanding of the project’s mission, the reigning standards of art, and the changing American political environment. Photographers filtered religion through the aesthetic lenses of abstract modernism and American regionalism. Local, ordinary piety was photographed rather than national organizations or unusual, heroic expressions of faith. By the late thirties, the demands of war caused a shift in their mission. Neither Stryker nor the photographers wanted to be remembered as propaganda makers, and yet much of the file celebrated the strength of the nation, not its weaknesses. In these later years, photographers used religious communities as ways to assert the cohesiveness of American society.

## The Documentary Impulse

The photographic project of the Farm Security Administration was undertaken with the same spirit as many of Roosevelt’s “alphabet” agencies established within one hundred days of his election in 1934. These agencies were to examine America’s national economic problems and then to implement specific solutions. By 1935 the Resettlement Administration—the forerunner to the Farm Security Administration—was established. Roosevelt appointed a Columbia University economics professor, Rexford Tugwell, as its director. Tugwell had been undersecretary of agriculture, but now he was to oversee efforts to improve the conditions of American farmers. The Resettlement Administration was to coordinate land-use planning, run migrant labor camps, support semicooperative farm projects, and fund various loan and grant programs and tenant-purchase plans (fig. 1.3). Between 1935 and 1937 the Resettlement Administration (RA) educated farmers about soil erosion and environmental pollution, established flood control and reforestation programs, and pressed for recognition of the plight of rural laborers. In 1937 its programs were taken over by the Farm Security Administration. Tugwell had used pictures in his economics textbooks and thought that by making pictures of real rural people suffering, he could gain support for the projects of the RA. Tugwell hired Roy Stryker to direct a group of photographers who were asked to provide an accurate, visible description of the government’s efforts to improve America’s social conditions. These men and women eventually made up the Historical Section of the Division of Information of the Farm Security Administration.

Tugwell, Stryker, and the photographers all shared the assumption that pictures put specific faces on the problems of rural life. Statistics and reports were important, but few Americans would be moved by a set of dry facts. If Americans *saw* the lives of the poor, they would be more concerned about poverty in the United States. Stryker and most of the photographers saw their mission as bringing together social scientific investigation, government reform policy, and artistic expression. The stated aim of the photographic project was to educate,



1.3 Russell Lee, kitchen of farm home built under FSA tenant purchase program.  
Hidalgo County, Texas, February 1939 (LC-US34-032145-D)

persuade, and convince. Several years before photojournalism became standard in magazines, government photographers had—in the words of Roy Stryker—“introduced Americans to America.”<sup>5</sup> From Stryker’s perspective, there was nothing sentimental about their depictions of rural life. Photographers employed the camera, the technological medium of the twentieth century, to document in a realistic and rigorous way the problems confronting American society.

The Historical Section was part of a documentary movement that flourished during the thirties and early forties. Americans collected information about the human dimension of the nation and presented their findings to a curious public. Some of this information was statistical and could fit easily into almanacs or encyclopedias. Artists looked at the regional American landscape and made paintings that stressed the unique character of the United States. Case studies, once considered mere scientific texts produced by social workers, were compiled into popular books. Private publishers developed picture magazines like *Life* (1936) and *Look* (1937) that used photographs to stress the documentary nature of their reporting. Such texts emphasized the universality of the human condition and conveyed the details of everyday life in ways that acknowledged the drama of feeling and emotion. People read documentary books, saw documentary movies, and looked at documentary pictures not merely because they wanted to be amused and entertained but because they wanted to know and understand. Depression miseries had forced them to take a closer look at the country in which they lived.<sup>6</sup>

During the thirties, photography was also used to illustrate what it was like to exist on the



edge of society. The Photo League, which split off from the Film and Photo League in 1936, believed that photography was an “expressive medium that could mirror social problems and promote social change.”<sup>7</sup> Many of the Photo League’s associates, members, and teachers came from immigrant Jewish families, especially from eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> In their preference for the streets of New York’s East Side, members of the Photo League did not make simple reform photographs but rather complicated representations of the social and cultural ethos in which they lived. Their photographs explored the raw character of their neighborhoods and families rather than promoting photography as a genteel art of beauty and technical skill. The Photo League’s commitment to “honest” photography (rather than art photography) created a standard for street photography. With the onset of the Depression, members were hired by government agencies, and they continued to shape documentary photography as it evolved during the New Deal years.

What was particularly new and important about the documentary impulse of the thirties was that the federal government funded much of this movement. During a period of massive unemployment and economic turmoil, the documentary impulse flourished because the government paid people to work. The FSA/OWI photographic project may have been the most extensive and easily accessible of those sponsored by the federal government, but it was by no means the only one. Foremost among those New Deal agencies that produced documentary works was the Works Program Administration (WPA). The WPA was begun in 1935, renamed the Works Projects Administration in 1939, and dismantled in 1943. It was under the WPA’s auspices that most art, theater, film, history, and photography projects were funded. From supporting Aaron Copland to write *Appalachian Spring*, to decorating post offices with historical murals, to preserving the words of former ex-slaves, WPA projects were absolutely essential to the thirties documentary spirit. Although only 7 percent of the WPA’s total budget, the federal arts and history projects convinced many Americans that they *had* an important culture.<sup>9</sup>

The WPA funded photography as a part of its humanities projects and also through a specific Photographic Division within the Federal Art Project. As with other New Deal agencies, pictures were taken of the various WPA divisions. The National Archives, for instance, houses 25,092 images depicting Federal Theater Project productions and 2,500 images made for the American Guide series organized by the Federal Writer’s Project.<sup>10</sup> Within the WPA’s Federal Art Project, the Photographic Division funded specific creative projects. Rather than depicting the nuts and bolts of WPA humanities-oriented projects, these photographs were to be examples of art themselves. WPA photographers who worked for the Federal Art Projects designed and controlled their own projects. They made studies of urban poverty, children, Jewish rituals, Harlem, and Coney Island. While images of New York City dominated federal creative photography, some photographers did work in Louisiana, Florida, Oregon, and California.

### Stryker’s Team

Given the flurry of documentary projects going on in the interwar years, it is not surprising that Stryker could employ a steady and talented pool of photographers. For the most part the

photographers Stryker hired were young men and women beginning their professional lives. They were not seasoned photographers recognized for their documentary expertise. Those who were familiar with cameras and photography were still developing their skills, although many had been trained as artists. At any one time, there would be only between three and six photographers employed by the Historical Section, but freelance photographers also sent Stryker pictures. Some of the men traveled with their wives, but most were single men and women who had no family ties. Their adventurous spirit was closely aligned to a curiosity about and a respect for humanity. Many had traveled to Europe in the twenties and thirties and then watched with awe as the brutal arm of fascism swept across the continent. The photographers were outsiders—Jews, women, an African American, an Irish Catholic—who had learned as children the fragility of social class and to be wary of the privileges of wealth. Most agreed that their job was to educate and reform through making pictures. There are, of course, exceptions to these generalizations. Not all of the photographers were educated, well traveled, and reform oriented. John Collier, Jr., traveled around the Horn of Africa but was dyslexic and never went to high school. John Vachon, who had majored in English in college, was originally hired as a filing clerk. Arthur Rothstein had never ventured outside of New York City before joining the Historical Section. Walker Evans showed little interest in the reforming possibilities of the photograph. Dorothea Lange had two children herself and married a man with three children. The length of time individuals worked for Stryker also varied, although all remember their experiences as formative.

What they experienced on the road knitted together all but the most independent-minded photographers into “Stryker’s team.” Photographers were given five dollars a day for living expenses and three cents a mile for gas. Stryker sent them informal scripts and letters describing various projects he wanted them to pursue. He also sent them lists of books and articles, expecting them to be intellectually prepared for their assignments. Cars were packed with at least two, usually three cameras, film, developing chemicals, replacement parts, lenses, flash bulbs, tripods, and enough clothes to get the photographer through weeks of sleeping in bare-bones hotels. When the photographers arrived in an area, they had to contact various governmental agencies whose representatives pointed out the appropriate places and people to photograph. Once in the field, the photographers had to persuade the skeptical to let them “shoot” their homes, families, fields, animals, and leisure activities. The women photographers had to convince the moralistic that a single woman on the road was not a prostitute. Arthur Rothstein remembered being asked about being a Jew, and Gordon Parks experienced the racism of a segregated Washington, D.C.

After a long day of photography, some developed the film in the hotel bathroom and sent the negatives back to Washington, where prints were made. Most, however, mailed the film to Washington, where Stryker’s darkroom staff made contact sheets. These were sent back to the photographers, who wrote captions for the acceptable photographs. If they could stay awake a few hours more, they would write of their adventures to Stryker or merely ask for more film. Life on the road was exciting but tough. All of the FSA/OWI photographers remember the experience as intensely educational, professionally stimulating, and personally challenging. Most made little more than \$35 per week in salary, but they did not complain. What could

have been better than being paid to travel around the country photographing when millions of people were waiting in breadlines and worrying about how to feed their children?

While the photographers were busy traveling the country, Stryker and his Washington staff spent most of their time trying to get the pictures out to the public. The FSA/OWI photographs appeared in major newspapers and magazines throughout the country, from the *Washington Post* to the *African American*, from *Architectural Forum* to *Junior Scholastic*. Stryker argued that publishing the photographs reduced social distances between classes, races, and regions and helped promote New Deal reforms. In addition to newspapers and magazines, FSA/OWI photographs appeared in commercial books. Archibald MacLeish used them to illustrate his epic poem *Land of the Free* (1938), Sherwood Anderson published them in *Home Town* (1940), and Richard Wright scattered them throughout *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). Publishers paid nothing for the rights to reproduce the government's photographs. The Historical Section assembled pictures of poor white and black farmers into small traveling exhibitions that went to camera clubs, universities, church groups, conventions, and state fairs. When a selection of FSA photographs was shown at the 1938 First International Photographic Exposition in Grand Central Palace in New York City, 540 responses were dropped in a comment box. While the majority of respondents felt the pictures were "moving and dramatic," some called them "subversive propaganda." Others warned the government, "Don't spend taxpayers' money on film." In 1939 and 1940 the Photo League in New York City used FSA photographs in exhibitions on rural America. Baptists displayed FSA exhibitions on sharecropping at their adult summer camps. Even the American Historical Association hosted an exhibition of FSA pictures at its national meeting in 1940.<sup>11</sup>

Larger collections of pictures were sent to prominent art museums. In 1938 the Museum of Modern Art in New York coordinated a traveling exhibition of fifty of the FSA photographs. Its press release boasted, "After the usual diet of the art world — cream puffs, éclairs and such — the hard, bitter reality of these photographs is the tonic the soul needs." Stryker mailed the pictures to whomever asked for them. He asked only for a shipping fee and set no restrictions on how the pictures should be used. The photographers had no control over the meanings ascribed to their pictures or their use. Newspapers cropped the photographs, laid them out at odd angles, and created their own narratives about what they meant. Museums mounted FSA photographs without the photographers' names near the prints. Baptists used them in 1941 to promote missionary work among the Dust Bowl migrants to California, ignoring entirely their original captions.<sup>12</sup> Since their deposit in 1944 at the Library of Congress, the photographs have been widely reprinted in every conceivable medium and now are even more available in digitized form. The project that Stryker began in 1935 continues to shape how we understand the thirties and forties, and to define the role of the visual in culture.

## Cowpunchers Don't Need Toothbrushes or Religion

In January 1939 Roy Stryker wrote a letter to one of his three photographers, Marion Post. Post had been traveling in Florida, and Stryker wanted her to meet with "a Miss Lowry" from the "Federal Council of Churches, Home Missions Board." Stryker explained that Miss Lowry

was promoting a “little book” called *They Starve That We May Eat* and that “she and her crowd are trying to stir the church groups up on the whole migrant, displaced agricultural labor problem.” Stryker seemed unusually curious about Miss Lowry. He asked Post to find out what Lowry thought about the failure of the La Follette hearings to go forward on their examination of New Deal violations of labor rights, and, perhaps more important, how other church groups were reacting to it. “Easy on this,” Stryker wrote in another letter. “I would hate to see Miss Lowry stampede her groups into any mass action. As you know, I have certain qualms about church groups anyway—you never know whether their ammunition is going to come out the proper end of the barrel, or whether it is going to come back and hit you in the face.”<sup>13</sup>

Marion Post attempted to accommodate her boss’s wishes but had a difficult time trying to connect with Lowry. Finally, the two women met in Belle Glade, Florida. Post wrote Stryker that she had taken Lowry and two other women to visit several families and to talk with workers in the field—doctors, nurses, and community leaders. The exchanges between Lowry, her associates, Post, and the other field contacts must not have gone well. “Maybe I’m intolerant in my own way,” Post wrote Stryker, “and I suppose these women are at least aware of a few more things and interested and active, but god damn it I can’t stand their approach to problems or their unrealistic and sentimental way of handling it. After a whole day of that crap and listening to them playing Jesus I could just plain puke!” Post had no sympathy for the churchwomen’s charitable solutions as she perceived them: “Just a little daily bible reading for the kiddies and a service on Sunday for all the folks.” She informed Stryker that she had told everyone that there was no connection between the FSA photographic project and that of the churchwomen, and that she would help out but that Lowry could not count on traveling with her. Post acknowledged that she would have to continue to meet with Lowry, but she assured her boss, “I won’t let her mess my plans up.”<sup>14</sup>

Stryker enjoyed the feisty letter from Post. “The description of the encounter with God’s Chosen delighted me no end,” he wrote back. “It just goes to prove my theory that once you get in the services of God, you seldom [are] ever able to free yourself of these damnable traits. Some do it, but not many.” He then thanked Post for her efforts and reassured her that she did not have to go out of her way to help Lowry make contacts in Florida. “I think this will cure me,” Stryker concluded, “of ever imposing any more people on you photographers.”<sup>15</sup> Stryker and Post came to an understanding in their correspondence: religious people were difficult; their methods were sanctimonious, patronizing, and ineffective; and there was no reason why a government photographer whose goal it was to improve rural living conditions should have to interact with “God’s Chosen.”

Given Roy Stryker’s sarcasm about “God’s Chosen,” we might be surprised to find out that he was raised in a Christian household and influenced by the Social Gospel movement. Like many twentieth-century reformers, Stryker learned as a child the values, practices, and languages of a religious community. As adults, however, both he and his photographers found the world outside of religion more hospitable to their efforts of social change. Stryker and his team had an intense interest in America’s people but were skeptical of organized religion. Churches and synagogues were not initiating changes in society and appeared only to support bigotry and otherworldliness. Stryker’s biography not only provides a sense of the leader of

the Historical Section, it also is an example of how the men and women of the thirties moved through and then out of religious communities.

Roy Emerson Stryker (1893–1975) was the quintessential “beyond-the-Beltway” government outsider, and his biography and personality shaped how the photographic project would develop. Born in Great Bend, Kansas, Stryker moved with his family to Montrose, Colorado, when he was three. In 1896 Montrose was a sleepy Colorado town barely fourteen years old. This frontier community on the western slope of the Rockies, however, was quickly developing the marks of culture. A high school and opera house were built, along with a series of churches—Methodist (1884), Congregational (1885), Baptist (1898), and Episcopal (1912). By 1912 even the Catholics, in “one of the most impressive ceremonies Montrose has ever had,” had laid the cornerstone for their church.<sup>16</sup>

Stryker’s father, George, was a farmer who has been called a “radical Populist.” He dabbled in politics and pursued small-business ventures in the growing town. George and his wife, Ellen, had seven children, and Roy was the youngest boy. According to Roy, at some point George “got religion from a circuit-riding preacher.” Stryker remembered that his father “always tried new things and he tried them harder than anybody else.” Family worship became a part of their daily activities: “We all had to get down on our knees in the evening and pray good and loud and nobody prayed louder than he did.” The elder Stryker combined his faith with his concern for radical politics. According to his son, the prayers became especially loud “at the end of one day when he had been stumping for Populism. He started out all right, but all at once his convictions got hold of him, and at the top of his voice he prayed: ‘Please God, damn the bankers of Wall Street, damn the railroads, and double damn the Standard Oil Company!’”<sup>17</sup>

Roy Stryker frequently told this story in order to illustrate his long-term commitment to social activism, something he had learned at his father’s knee. Stryker also used the tale for its humorous ironic twist. After he left the federal government, he actually joined Standard Oil, setting up the company’s photographic department. Stryker also probably thought that the combination of praying and damning shed some light on the unpredictable character of religion. His father, however, might have been puzzled by his son’s sentiments, because George Stryker probably perceived a continuity between Populism and evangelical Protestantism. Social reform movements—from abolition to women’s rights to temperance to civil rights—have been fueled by the religious convictions of their leaders and supporters. Populism and evangelism share a pragmatic concern for reform, an anti-big business orientation, and the belief that Americans can successfully improve their society because of their Christian commitments. While churches in the cities certainly could be bastions of wealth and privilege, rural churches like those in Montrose often had closer ties with grassroots needs and experiences. Farmers met in churches and used biblical language to articulate their concerns. Even if Stryker’s father never set foot in a Methodist or Baptist church, it would not be unusual that his own Christian beliefs energized his politics and his politics deepened his religious convictions. Although the humor of Roy Stryker’s story is based on the opposition of praying and damning, the two acts often have been joined in religious history. “Getting religion” for many Americans has been a politically radicalizing experience.

There is no question that Stryker’s time in rural Colorado gave him an insight into Ameri-

can life that was different from many of the government bureaucrats in the Roosevelt administration. His self-confidence, salty tongue, pointed sense of humor, and belief that there was more to America than the East Coast may have been cultivated on the rugged western landscape (fig. 1.4). His experiences in Montrose may also have given him a realistic perspective on the precarious position of rural Americans in the national economy during the early decades of the twentieth century. Life on the High Plains could be brutal and capricious. Ranchers were as dependent on the vicissitudes of livestock trends determined by urban markets as they were on the weather and the land. Stryker may also have felt somewhat out of place in the physically demanding rural West. A small man with weak eyes, he was at home with books as well as with horses. He served, for instance, as the manager of the high school football team, not as one of the players. The death of Stryker's father when he was sixteen must also have heightened his sense of vulnerability. His family's support of his desire for learning and education gave Stryker an alternative to a life of hard and frequently boring rural labor. Like many youngest sons, Stryker could not find a place for himself on the farm, so in 1920 he moved permanently to the city—initially to the small town of Golden, located near Denver, Colorado. There he pursued a science degree at the Colorado School of Mines.

Stryker might have stayed in Denver and had a career in chemistry if he had not made the acquaintance of George Collins, a young minister. Stryker remembers meeting several socially committed ministers during his time in Golden who understood his desire to experience the world outside of Colorado. These ministers ran a “kind of crazy workshop” where young people would work in industry and then meet—sometimes as many as four nights a week—to discuss issues “with all kinds of people.” Stryker credited one of the ministers, George Collins, with facilitating his move to New York City. In a 1967 interview Stryker recalled that he “read the *New Republic*, and I saw the *Nation*, and I read a lot of Rauschenbusch. I read a lot of things and my life was changing rapidly.”<sup>18</sup>

Through this “crazy workshop” Stryker had been introduced to the Social Gospel movement, a group of theologians, teachers, and ministers who encouraged political progressivism and social action by the churches. These liberal Protestants were well aware of the negative consequences of the Industrial Revolution—the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few, the poverty of the workers, the squalor of urban centers. They argued that Christians must not be satisfied with individual piety or simple-minded charity. Instead, Christian charity needed to be brought into the modern era. Biblical and theological insights should be accompanied by scientific analysis of the causes of poverty. Saving souls was not enough. Christians ought to attend to the nation's ills and work toward creating a just and righteous social order.

Stryker remembered that the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch had influenced his social awareness. Walter Rauschenbusch was a Baptist minister who spent the first ten years of his career as pastor of a slum church in New York City. He later became a professor at Rochester Seminary, and his books *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), *Christianizing the Social Order* (1917), and *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (1917) were best sellers. In 1916 he published *The Social Principles of Jesus*, a study book for college students just like Roy Stryker. Rauschenbusch was a part of the radical wing of the Social Gospel movement, and his writings



1.4 Roy Stryker as a young man in western Colorado. From Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 7.

leveled sharp criticisms at American capitalism. He argued that “the church is both a partial realization of the new society in which God’s will is done and also the appointed instrument for the further realization of that new society in the world about it.”<sup>19</sup> To be converted to the path of Jesus meant turning from profit motives and cultural prejudices and toward brotherhood, sharing, and cooperation. Under Collins’s guidance Stryker gained an awareness of America’s social problems and began to volunteer at boys’ clubs in Denver. It was through a Protestant minister that Roy Stryker moved from being a bookworm cattle herder to being a socially conscious twenty-seven-year-old.

The experience of studying with George Collins and working with the poor of Denver convinced Stryker that a degree in chemistry was not what he wanted. Stryker discussed with Collins his interest in leaving Colorado to pursue a degree at Columbia University in New York City. Collins had contacts in New York and knew people at Union Theological Seminary, a center of progressive Protestantism. He eventually arranged for Roy and his new bride, Alice, to be hired as workers at a settlement house run by Union. In September 1921 the newlyweds headed east. Once in New York, the Strykers learned that in order to be eligible for permanent employment and lodging at the settlement house, one of them had to be registered as a student at Union Theological Seminary. Since Union was a graduate institution, the student had already to have completed an undergraduate degree. Consequently Alice, who had been a teacher in Colorado, enrolled as a theology student at Union while Roy signed up for classes a block away at Columbia. For the next year the couple worked for room and partial board at Union’s settlement house on 105th Street, ten blocks from Columbia. At the end of the year the Strykers moved to an apartment and ended their ties with Union. At Columbia, meanwhile, Roy met and impressed his economics professor, Rexford Tugwell. In 1934 President Roosevelt appointed Tugwell to be undersecretary of agriculture, and a year later Tugwell hired Stryker to head a photographic department (fig. 1.5).

Roy and Alice Stryker were able to move from Colorado to New York because of the support of a minister. And yet in his later years, Stryker was known to say, “Cowpunchers don’t need toothbrushes or religion.”<sup>20</sup> Neither his daughter nor his professional acquaintances remember Stryker as having any religious commitments. Alice and Roy did not make their daughter go to church. After leaving Colorado, Stryker never reconnected with a religious community even though the family continued their friendship with George Collins.

Roy and Alice Stryker maintained an interest in religion into their young adulthood because they found a minister who connected faith to social reform. Just as the Social Gospel had initially excited their spiritual commitments, its failure to catch hold in grassroots Protestantism may have motivated their absence from church. Christian socialism in Europe and the Social Gospel movement in the United States had offered the most sophisticated analysis of Western economic problems ever attempted by theologians. Hopes had been raised, but the Christian churches were unable to rise to the occasion. The vast majority of their members did not support the exchange of capitalism for socialism. Middle-class Protestants had established a style of church life that was segregated, snobbish, hierarchical, and isolated from social ills. Liberal Protestantism was still too steeped in middle-class notions of propriety, charity, and piety to fulfill the hopes of the Social Gospel movement. Seminary professors may have been writing books about social change, but not much was changing. Worship in





1.5 John Collier, Jr., portrait of Roy E. Stryker. Washington, D.C., January 1942 (LC-USF34-082105-C)

New York probably lacked the intimacy and conviction of Stryker's small, home-based Social Gospel community in Denver. As Stryker later explained, "I was basically a radical. I was basically from a socialist home."<sup>21</sup> The Social Gospel movement had raised the expectations of men like Stryker, but by 1921 it was obvious that large-scale progressive social change was not going to come from religious communities. Stryker may have found in the settlement house work of Union Seminary exactly the same sanctimonious naïveté that Marion Post saw in Miss Lowry. When Stryker moved to Washington, D.C., serious social reform was coming from people working in government service and not in the church.

### The "Churched" and the "Unchurched"

No one knows exactly why Roy and Alice Stryker or the other photographers stopped going to church and synagogue. We can only speculate in general about possible causes for their loss of interest. For Protestants, one reason may have been that by the end of the twenties, religious culture no longer commanded the attention it once had. In late-nineteenth-century

America, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists dominated American life. Their members sat in Congress and on the Supreme Court. They staffed the major research universities. They ran America's industries. In 1898 President William McKinley, a Methodist, sent American troops to the Philippines to uplift, civilize, and "Christianize" the mostly Catholic Filipinos. Progressive-era reforms—everything from improving prisons to supporting public education to demanding an end to drinking—had close associations with mainline Protestantism.

At the same time, various internal and external forces were undermining the cultural and social position of Protestantism. By the twentieth century, conservative movements within mainline denominations had begun to force Protestant theologians to articulate more clearly where they stood on such issues as biblical literalism, biological evolution, and the reality of heaven and hell. Populist politicians like William Jennings Bryan argued for the farmer and laborer while condemning theological modernism. Protestants were leaving churches they thought of as too liberal and joining fundamentalist groups that preached individual salvation, personal morality, and political disengagement. Others became Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. These smaller religious communities grew quickly in the interwar years. Those who remained in mainstream Protestant congregations were more and more willing to let nonreligious organizations take over the nation's social service organizations. Hospitals, orphanages, schools, and charity groups severed their ties with Protestant denominations and presented themselves as independent, secular institutions.

By the thirties whatever Protestant consensus had earlier existed in America was gone. Immigration from southern and eastern Europe brought more Catholics and Jews to the nation's shores. Cities filled with people who did not speak English and did not go to a Protestant church. For many Catholics, ethnic parishes became places where newcomers not only received spiritual and physical sustenance but organized to promote their own interests. Catholics built churches, schools, and seminaries that transformed the look of the urban landscape and spoke to their increasing social prominence. Irish Catholics in particular became involved with local politics and threatened the hold that Protestants had over East Coast cities. Linking with labor organizers and northern intellectuals, they agitated against Prohibition. The Democrats in 1928 nominated Alfred E. Smith, a Catholic and prorepealer, for president. Although Smith lost the election, it was clear that the cities no longer were in Protestant hands. Roosevelt secured the ascendancy of Catholics by rewarding their political loyalty with government jobs.

Jews also were moving into traditionally Protestant circles. The FSA/OWI photographers Jack Delano, Ben Shahn, Edwin Roskam, Esther Bubley, Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, Charles Fenn Jacobs, Arthur Siegel, Edwin and Louise Roskam, and Howard Liberman all came from Jewish families, though their biographers do not define them as "religious" Jews.<sup>22</sup> These photographers may have continued their families' commitment to humanitarian causes or even to socialism, but they did not become involved in Jewish ritual life in the thirties and early forties. For many eastern European Jews who came to America in the late nineteenth century, *Yiddishkeit* was based more on ethnic associations than on religious beliefs. Ritual observance was only one of many ways that people could understand their Jewishness in the New World. Some Jews who came to America had little religious training and even less religious

interest. Others, who had chafed under the restrictions of Jewish village life or the suffocation of the immigrant home, welcomed the openness of the city streets. Socialists, communists, labor organizers, and intellectuals could turn away from traditional Judaism without turning away from being Jewish. Ideologies other than religious ones linked people from diverse European regions with native-born Americans.

Even religious Jews had flexibility in the expression of their faith commitments. Synagogue life was diverse both ritually and socially, but to the consternation of American rabbis, Jews could participate in religious life at home without supporting synagogue culture. Following the trend in Protestant America to connect piety with domesticity, women became critical players in defining what was religiously “Jewish.” Jews could get involved in humanitarian movements such as the Ethical Cultural Society, which promoted a nonreligious orientation to reform but was run by acculturated Jews. Its founder, Felix Adler, the son of a reformed rabbi, stressed the importance of creating proper relationships among all people rather than promoting religious doctrines. But the Ethical Society also provided Sunday morning services with addresses by teachers, songs, “festivals of humanity,” and rites of passage. The father of the photographer Margaret Bourke-White, though raised in an Orthodox Jewish household, married his Irish-American bride Minnie at the Ethical Culture Society in New York. Felix Adler developed a workable ideology of secular humanism, but he also provided Jews a place where they could be married and buried without recourse to rabbis or ministers.<sup>23</sup>

Success in the United States may not have included converting to Christianity, but it often meant downplaying or erasing one’s “Jewishness.” Rather than losing social status by assimilating, during the twenties and thirties Jews actually gained cultural and economic advantages by not associating with their religious communities. The anti-Semitism of the period limited the movement of Jews in education and the professions by questioning Judaism’s legitimacy as a religion appropriate to modern democracy. Assimilation into American culture often entailed a reworking of one’s ethnicity to eliminate names that were difficult to pronounce or that sent the wrong “signals.” The FSA/OWI photographer Jacob Ovcharov — Jack Delano — remembers that his parents approved of his new American name. The dropping of certain religious practices and beliefs was not merely a voluntary turn toward the “dis-enchanted” world; it also was the recognition that participation in certain religions restricted one’s movement in America.

The fragmentation of Protestantism and Judaism in the early twentieth century both diversified religious observance and opened up a space for quiet absence from religious practices. Some Americans did not merely switch churches; they stopped going to church entirely. While it had always been acceptable for men of certain classes, especially young men, not to be involved in a religious organization, by the twenties many more Americans could count themselves among the unchurched. The rise of mass entertainment, the legitimization of leisure activities on Sunday, the establishment of an anticlerical Marxian socialism, the popularization of Freud, and the public acceptance of agnostic intellectuals all contributed to the social acceptance of skipping church on Sunday or forgoing prayers on Sabbath. Americans may have still said that they were Methodist or Presbyterian, but this said more about their parents than about themselves. Roy Stryker and his photographers were typical of many of the

cultural trendsetters of the interwar years who no longer looked to institutional religion as a source for cultural innovation or social influence. Many upper-echelon New Deal workers, artists, writers, and even liberal theologians no longer put much stock in weekly attendance at church or participation in Jewish ritual observances. The religion of their parents may have stimulated their social conscience, but a faith community did not sustain them.

## Hopeless People with Hope

Religious behaviors were photographed because they were understood to be a part of American culture, not because the photographers were religious. If the photographers were to produce *real* pictures of America rather than propaganda, they needed to include religion. Stryker acknowledged the importance of religion in the lives of Americans and explicitly asked the photographers to look for religious practices. After a lunch with the sociologist Robert Lynd in 1936, he sent a list of “things which should be photographed as American background.” The list included:

Attending church

Follow through a set of pictures showing people on their way from their home to church

Getting out of church,

Visiting and talking

Returning from church to home,

visiting and talking in the vestibule.<sup>24</sup>

Another list of “stories of culture of the U.S.” featured: “American roadside, American interiors, mantle pieces—wall paper . . . ‘God Bless our Home’ [mottoes] bibles . . . movies . . . churches—missions—tabernacles— itinerant preachers—gospel cars—hymn singing—religious signs, posters—religious statues, shrines, exhortations—going to church—talking after church.”<sup>25</sup> Roy Stryker told his photographers not merely to photograph poverty and New Deal reforms but to capture the human side of the people who were living through difficult times. Most of the FSA/OWI photographs illustrate religion as a local, ordinary phenomenon that is fundamental to the daily life of average people. This stress on the ordinary resulted from the humanistic orientation of New Deal ideology as well as from the progressive principles of Stryker and his team. While the importance of illustrating “American Background” became more pressing with the war buildup, from the very beginning Stryker hoped to create a broad-based photographic file of life in the United States for present and future use.

During the first years of the project the photographers spent their time in rural America, which limited the religious communities with which they would come into contact. Protestant and Catholic practices make up the bulk of the religious images produced in the thirties. The FSA was, however, interested in experimental ways of improving agriculture, so in 1935 and 1936 photographers did visit a Jewish cooperative farm in New Jersey. After war broke out in Europe, the FSA photographed a Jewish community in rural Connecticut and, in the forties,

Jews living in New York City. On the other hand, Native American religion or the religions of Asia are never pictured in the file. Stryker steered his photographers clear of native peoples, who had been extensively photographed and whose images were finally being protected both by their leaders and by the government. While there were Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims in the country in the thirties and forties their numbers were quite small. Strict immigration quotas and outright exclusions had restricted non-European populations. Photographers sought out certain tight-knit communal groups, such as the Amish and the Mormons, but these communities failed to challenge the assumption that religion in rural America was Christian. Still, the image that emerges from the FSA/OWI file demonstrates the tremendous vitality, breadth, and persistence of religious expressions during the interwar years.

At times photographers did criticize religious practices. This was particularly the case when religious people behaved in ways that challenged the New Deal model of state-based social reform. Stryker and his photographers preferred religion to be about rituals and sacred spaces, not welfare policy. There are few examples of religious organizations trying to cope with the demands of the Depression on their congregations. Direct visual disapproval, however, was rare. More often than not, photographers merely focused on those elements of religion to which they were attracted. Given the widespread and diverse character of religious life in the United States, it was not difficult for Marion Post to ignore Protestant charity workers in Florida and instead to photograph an itinerate preacher. Post took several photographs of this evangelist talking with African Americans along the roadside (fig. 1.6). She quoted him as saying, "Before I knew our Lord I used to be a terrible sinner. I'd get so drunk I couldn't stand up." City clergy and national organizations were disregarded, while local devotions and congregational leaders were presented as the religion of the "common man."<sup>26</sup>

Roy Stryker was charged with documenting the impact of the Depression on the "common man," but that was not as easy as simply showing poor Americans as "the most friendless, hopeless people in the whole country, [whom] nobody wanted to see."<sup>27</sup> If people were represented as totally worn out physically and spiritually, like the land and the economic order, then what good would it be to enact New Deal reforms? Pictures of deserted farms, decaying homes, and desiccated people would only intensify the notion that rural life had lost its vitality and was vanishing into the natural environment. A harsh portrayal of rural poverty might motivate lawmakers and citizens to assume that the situation was hopeless and that agricultural problems were so massive that nothing could be done to solve them. The visual image would paralyze viewers rather than spur them on to change.

At the same time, showing the poor as having hope and retaining a sense of their humanity in the face of economic disaster had its own set of problems. Presenting the poor as individuals with dignity and spirit tended to romanticize their lives. In pursuit of the strength of the poor, photographers could end up with "beautifying" poverty. The thirties documentary filmmaker Paul Rotha explained that "beauty is one of the greatest dangers of documentation."<sup>28</sup> If the photograph was too artistic, the viewer would not see the reality of economic decay and instead would be captivated by the feel of the image. The picture then would become a symbol of timeless sorrow rather than a reflection of a situation created by people—a situation that might also be ended by people.



1.6 Marion Post [Wolcott], wandering preacher talking with two African Americans and children.  
Belle Glade, Florida, January 1939 (LC-USF34-050927-D)

Stryker and his photographers were also concerned about the propagandistic nature of their project. Americans did not want to see propaganda. Fascists and communists produced art, movies, and photographs that were overly dramatic, that omitted critical information, and that enhanced the power of the government. With World War I over, the U.S. government had no business making propaganda. Even in the forties, when the Historical Section was asked to help mobilize people for war, Stryker and the photographers resisted making sentimental propaganda. Stryker believed that *real* pictures of Americans who displayed authentic spirit and vitality would convince citizens to fight for freedom. If the photographs were too simplistic, or too dramatic, or too romantic, or too preachy, Americans would not take the images seriously. While from our contemporary perspective all the FSA/OWI photographs might be considered propaganda, from Stryker's perspective none of them should be.

The Historical Section thus had complicated tasks to accomplish. Stryker and his team were reformers, but they did not want to make propaganda. The photographers were asked to portray the nightmare of poverty but not to represent it as so horrible that people would turn their faces away from the images. The pictures had to show the inhumanity of economic hardship without destroying the humanity of the poor or directly attacking capitalism. Likewise, the photographers were to have eyes for art, but they were not to make pictures so beautiful such that the viewers missed the point of the photograph. Meeting these goals was difficult.

Within the FSA/OWI file there are examples of success and failures, as well as every expression in between. Photographing religious practices, spaces, and objects helped the photographers achieve their goals by presenting faith as an integral but circumscribed part of the culture of average Americans. But the religious world is not so easily controlled. Stryker was well aware that sometimes the “ammunition” did not always come out of the “proper end of the barrel.”



2.1 Dorothea Lange, gospel bus on Sunday morning. Kern County, California, November 1938  
(LC-USF34-018372-E)



## 2

### Enduring Faith



We have a grave problem in this state of California,” Dorothea Lange wrote to Roy Stryker in 1937, “with these tens of thousands of drought people.” Lange had been traveling with her husband, the economist Paul Taylor, throughout California, taking pictures for the FSA. “They keep on arriving, and the [rain] is coming. The newspapers are playing headlines and no one has the solution. This is no longer a publicity campaign for migratory agricultural labor camps. This is a migration of people, and a rotten mess.”<sup>1</sup> Lange and Taylor were witnessing the living conditions of poor, mostly white workers who had come from the Dust Bowl states to labor in the fields. The life of nonnative migrant workers in California had always been exceedingly hard. California landowners, however, were hiring native-born Americans to pick their crops since many Mexicans had been forced to return to