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feature article

Photographing the Great Depression: Recovering the Historical Record

—Kyle Flynn, *Inquiry* student editor (Edited by Jennifer Lee)

Sometimes, a picture can evoke such strong emotions that we are compelled to discover more about the photograph, the photographer, and the period in which the photograph was taken. Photographs from the Great Depression captured Isabel Klein. The images she viewed compelled her to attempt to solve the mysteries of a 1938 photography exhibit whose existence had nearly been lost to history.

Isabel Klein, currently a senior women's studies major, is no stranger to the power of pictures. Both her parents have a passion for photography, and Isabel has always been interested in the subject. That interest gained intensity when, as a sophomore, Isabel enrolled in Dr. Lisa MacFarlane's 444 seminar, "American Studies: Picturing America." MacFarlane's seminar focused on how American photographs from 1870 to the 1950s both reveal and shape ideas about American identity. While viewing photographs from MacFarlane's seminar, Isabel was drawn to those taken during the Great Depression, for it was these photographs that seemed particularly eager to tell a story. The faces looking out from the black and white images vividly detailed the pain, hardship, and deprivation experienced by Americans at that period in history. With her curiosity piqued, Isabel sought to learn more about the photography of the period.



Isabel (right) and her mentor, Dr. Lisa MacFarlane, discuss photographs.

Discovery and Research

As Isabel began investigating photography during the Great Depression, she and her mother came across a footnote in a book that referenced a 1938 exhibit of Depression era photography. If Isabel could have viewed the photographs from that exhibit, her curiosity may have been satisfied. But, since there was very little information available on the exhibit, Isabel's curiosity only grew. The footnoted reference was her biggest lead, and Isabel intended to follow it up. However, the internet searches and library databases were soon exhausted, yielding few results. Isabel knew then that she would have to get her hands dirty by digging much deeper. The next two logical places to look were the Library of Congress and the University of Louisville, for the University houses an archive of documents on Roy Stryker, the man who was responsible for exhibiting the photographs of the Great Depression in the 1938 International Photographic Exhibition in New York City.

The Library of Congress responded to Isabel's request with an article that merely mentioned the exhibit in passing. The response was disappointing and frustrating, but it also served to strengthen Isabel's resolve. She now had a true sense of purpose for her project: Not only would she research certain photographs from the Great Depression, but she would also recover information pertaining to the exhibit that had, for all practical purposes, been lost to history. As Isabel recalls, "The fact that the Library of Congress couldn't answer my questions about the exhibit was how I knew it would be a great research project. But it proved to be quite the undertaking, too."



Arthur Rothstein. Eroded land on tenant's farm. Alabama, 1937. Library of Congress, LC-USF346-025121-D

It's safe to say that's an understatement. While studying abroad in the Netherlands the next semester, Isabel scrambled to put together a proposal to the University of New Hampshire for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship grant. She submitted the proposal without much information on the exhibit; in fact, she had no idea whether she would be able to find any of the photographs. Fortunately, after submitting her grant proposal, Isabel was contacted by an archivist at the University of Louisville who told her they had found an inventory detailing the photographers and some of their photographs for the exhibit. Despite this encouraging news, Isabel's attention was still focused on whether her grant would be approved. By the time mid-April rolled around, Isabel began to prepare herself for the worst: rejection of her grant proposal.

As it turned out, Isabel's worries were unwarranted; her grant was approved and she was ecstatic. Shortly after returning home, she began work on her research project. The first stage was pouring through secondary sources in the library. Isabel spent the entire month of June in UNH's Dimond Library, reading as much as she could in preparation for her trips to Washington, DC, and Louisville, Kentucky. When the time arrived, Isabel traveled back and forth for over two weeks from her home in Cleveland, Ohio, to Louisville and Washington, DC.

Isabel's study abroad experience had taught her to plan for obstacles. While she faced some logistical hurdles, such as trying to track down sources on an unfamiliar campus or communicating with a project mentor who was overseas, Isabel's bigger concern was how best to navigate the unfamiliar territory of research. As she recalls: "When you write a paper for an English class, you generally don't have to worry about asking permission to use names, or about copyright infringements, liability, and so on." Isabel spent her July days in archives, sorting through primary sources: the photographs themselves and the correspondence between the photographers and their boss, Roy Stryker.

Coming Into Focus

Slowly, Isabel gained a clearer understanding of an exhibit that had been lost to history. As part of the New Deal, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) had been formed in an effort to combat and chronicle poverty in rural America. Its Information Division was instrumental in distributing educational material and press information, and in establishing communications with the public at large. Part of this effort was a photography program, headed by an economist named Roy Stryker, who was put in charge of creating the Great Depression exhibit for the 1938 International Photographic Exhibition. According to Stryker, the exhibit's theme was "people." Isabel explains that the exhibit chronicled the hardships faced by Americans in both rural and urban settings during the Depression, "but with an emphasis on the plight of the rural poor—mostly white Americans." The exhibit would be shown to the American public to, as Stryker himself put it, "introduce America to Americans." The program and the exhibit employed many household names in the photography world, such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Russell Lee.

For Isabel, research on the exhibit was interesting on two levels. First, she was able to recover many of the photographs that were part of the exhibit, seeing first-hand the hardships suffered by Americans during the Depression. Second, the primary documents consisted not only of photographs, but also of correspondence between Roy Stryker and his photographers as well as comment cards by patrons who attended the exhibit. Isabel found this part particularly interesting for the comments revealed public sentiment. Comments ranged from a “waste of taxpayer money” to “excellent—a real living example of conditions in the U.S.” to three individuals wishing for a public leader like Hitler. Even the language used on the comments and correspondence was indicative of the time period: “cool” wasn’t the cool word yet; it was “swell.”



Russell Lee. Christmas dinner in home of Earl Pauley. Iowa, 1936. Library of Congress, LC-USF34-006326-D

Not only did Isabel find parts of the missing exhibit, but she also found everyday details of the work that went into producing it. Notes from Roy Stryker to his photographers included instructions on what to shoot as well as warnings to cut down on the amount of film they used. The photographers would send their responses on hotel stationery, sometimes with inside jokes or silly doodles. But what some of these notes revealed to Isabel was that within the microcosm of the Farm Security Administration’s photography program, there was a battle to keep people employed, just as the FSA sought to do for the community at large. Roy Stryker lived and breathed the photography project. When funding was threatened to be cut, which it was on several occasions, Stryker fought to keep the program in place so that his photographers would keep their jobs.

Isabel was quick to recognize that Roy Stryker was meticulous in his management style. He would send shooting scripts to his photographers, telling them what subjects to photograph and in what settings. Stryker also went to painstaking lengths to keep track of inventories and expenditures, such as how much film was used and how much transportation and hotels would cost. However, amidst all these detailed instructions and records, there is nothing about



Arthur Rothstein. Mountain people. Maryland, 1936. Library of Congress, LC-USF34-005574-E

This observation has led to several questions: why were people photographed the way they were? Was it to portray something specific, or was it spur-of-the-moment artistic license by the photographers? What was the decision-making process that led to certain photographs being chosen out of hundreds of others? (Isabel notes that “women and children [were] important subjects [for the exhibit], particularly images of sick, dirty and malnourished children.”) Finally, how much of this photography exhibit was a documentary effort and how much of it was possibly for a political agenda that stretched beyond the FSA’s mission to chronicle poverty?

It was almost as if Isabel had come full circle, for the ideas discussed in Dr. MacFarlane's seminar certainly had an application here. Did these photographs of the Great Depression *reveal* ideas about the American identity? Or were they meant to *shape* ideas on the suffering of the Great Depression—perhaps to the extent of shaping and justifying public policy? Or, was it a combination of both?

Following a trail that started with an obscure footnote, Isabel's research solved the mystery of what this 1938 exhibit was and where the photographs were. In fact, through her relentless work, Isabel was able to recover and compile into a slideshow many photographs that would otherwise have been lost. She has given a voice to those almost lost photographs that seemed so eager to tell a story.

Yet, while Isabel Klein can, and should, derive a great deal of satisfaction knowing she has brought to light an important part of our nation's historical and pictorial record, one suspects the questions that arose after Isabel solved the first part of her mystery are still looking for an answer.



Arthur Rothstein. Sharecropper's child suffering from rickets and malnutrition. Arkansas, 1935. Library of Congress, LC-USF33-002002-M2



Dorothea Lange. Mother of family camped near a creek bed, panning for gold. California, 1935. Library of Congress, LC-USF341-009474-C



Ben Shahn. Mother and child. Arkansas, 1935. Library of Congress, LC-USF33-006055-M2

Note: A bound copy of all the photos, "*How American People Live, April 1938*": *A Recreation of the Photography Exhibit*, can be viewed in the Women's Studies Office in room 203 of Huddleston Hall on the UNH campus, Durham. Office hours are Monday through Thursday 9-5 and Friday 9-4. Call ahead to verify: 603-862-2194. In the fall of 2009, Isabel Klein entered the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland to obtain a Master of Library Science with a specialization in Archives, Records and Information Management.

Author Bio

Kyle Flynn, of Nashua, New Hampshire, is a junior philosophy major and French/economics minor in his first year at Inquiry. Currently residing in Dover, Kyle is an Honors Program student who chose to attend the University of New Hampshire after correspondence with a UNH philosophy professor while still in high school. He adds that getting a scholarship made the choice easy. Kyle joined Inquiry because he enjoys writing and wanted the experience of being on the editorial board. Interested in philosophy as well as economics, Kyle is the only philosophy major working with the Atkins Investment Group as an economic analyst. With that experience he hopes to attend graduate school to further his study of economics. Kyle spends his free time reading, skiing, and playing soccer.