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BEN SHAHN: A NEW DEAL PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE OLD SOUTH

by

SUSAN HARRIS EDWARDS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art
History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

October 17, 1995
Date

Robert Pincus-Smith
Chair of Examining Committee

October 30, 1995
Date

RCW Loney
Executive Officer

Marlene Park

Carol Armstrong

Christopher Phillips
Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

BEN SHAHN: A NEW DEAL PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE OLD SOUTH

by

Susan Harris Edwards

Dissertation Advisor: Professor Robert Pincus-Witten

This dissertation proposes a critical study of a group of photographs that Ben Shahn made for the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration (RA/FSA) in the American South in the autumn of 1935. As a social artist and an ardent supporter of New Deal initiatives, Shahn was particularly well-suited to serve the federal government. As a humanitarian he was highly motivated to help the victims of poverty and discrimination that he encountered in the South. This dissertation examines how the Roosevelt administration used photography to promote relief and reform programs, especially to assist the rural South; and how to this end, Shahn's photographs were effective. Moreover, this study confirms Shahn's professional status as a photographer, dispelling the general perception that he used photography merely as source material for later paintings, posters and murals.

Chapter I details the evolution of the Resettlement

Administration, its photography project, Shahn's commitment to the social basis of art, why his politics were relevant and useful for New Deal initiatives and Shahn's motives vis-a-vis revisionist critiques of documentary truth and "victim" photography. Chapters II-V are devoted to examining the photographs and the social and historical conditions observed and documented by Shahn. Chapter II examines Shahn's photographs of the culture and livelihood of mountaineers living in the southern Appalachian and Ozark regions. Chapter III is devoted to the photographs which document agrarian capitalism as practiced in cotton production. It opens with a discussion of how racial segregation came to underlie southern labor practice. Chapter IV shows how Shahn's sociological approach was appropriate and sensitive to Protestant Christianity and its contradictory role in southern capitulation and survival. Chapter V concerns the southern preoccupation with the past and the rhetoric of loss, and how these factors are manifested in images that Shahn made along the Mississippi River. Shahn was active as a photographer only in the 1930s, but as this dissertation attests during those years and especially in 1935 he produced photographs that were in many ways more interesting than his paintings.

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Thrall Soby papers, Museum Archives. For permission to reproduce photographs from their collection I am grateful to the Fogg Art Museum and the Library of Congress.

This dissertation concerns not only the photographs that Ben Shahn made in the South but also the people and places in those photographs. I owe my compassion for those people and my interest in their world to the members of my family who first told me of life during the Great Depression. I want thank my family for love, faith, strength, wit and inspiration.

Above all, I am indebted to Ben Shahn for producing thousands of the most compelling photographs of the Depression era.

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INTRODUCTION

While the paintings and graphics of Ben Shahn (1898-1969) have attracted much scholarly attention, his photography is largely unstudied except as source material for works in other media or in the context of the careers of his more famous photographer colleagues at the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration (RA/FSA).¹ Admittedly, Shahn used the camera in part in a manner not unlike Degas, Eakins or Sheeler, as a tool for sketching, and his paintings, *Vacant Lot*, 1939 [Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut] (Fig. 1) and *Handball*, 1939 [Museum of Modern Art, New York] (Fig. 3) are far better known than the photographs from which they were derived (Figs. 2 and 4).

At times, Shahn made conflicting statements about his commitment to pursuing a photographic career and disparaged

¹Between 1935 and 1943, more than twenty photographers worked for either the RA/FSA or the Office of War Information (OWI). They included Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Dorothea Lange, Marion Post Wolcott, Russell Lee, Jack Delano, John Vachon, Gordon Parks, John Collier, Jr., Marjory Collins, Esther Bubley and Ben Shahn. After leaving the RA/FSA or OWI, most of these artists pursued careers either as fine arts or commercial photographers.

Hereafter, whenever I am referring the continuous agency of the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration I will utilize the standard acronym, RA/FSA. For text that refers specifically to agency policy or practice from 1935 until 1937, I will use the legal name of the agency during this period, the Resettlement Administration.

his technical ability; and yet, he never considered his photographic work marginal. He also claimed that there was no difference between the importance of a painting and the importance of a photograph. Each was a picture and each had the power to convey a message.² During his lifetime, Shahn's dealers did not promote his photography. Nevertheless, the work was known and appreciated. The curator James Thrall Soby included several photographs in the 1947 Ben Shahn retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Shahn obviously encouraged this decision since he was actively involved in selecting the work for the exhibition. Later, Shahn donated several of his photographs to the MoMA collection.

Shahn took up photography in the early 1930s and began making photographs in and around New York City, but most of the photographs he made were commissioned by the federal government for the RA/FSA between 1935 and 1938. In 1935 Shahn accepted a position working as an artist in the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration. He soon met and befriended the Chief of the Historical Division Roy E. Stryker. Initially he served as an advisor to Stryker; later, he became one of the official RA/FSA photographers. The photographs Shahn made for the government can be divided into three bodies of work beginning with those he made on his

²Davis Pratt, ed., *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 2.

first trip to the South in 1935. Two years later, Stryker sent Shahn south again, this time to Alabama, Tennessee and North Carolina. The third body of Shahn's RA/FSA photographs was made in 1938 when Roy Stryker assigned Shahn to cover the "harvest" in Ohio. The purpose of his second and third trips was to gather visual evidence documenting the positive effects of relief efforts. As a result the tenor of most of these later photographs is more optimistic than the 1935 work. In August of 1938, Shahn resigned from the FSA. He never made photographs with the same intensity again. When he died in 1969, he still had in his possession over 4,000 prints and approximately 2,000 negatives.

The purpose of this dissertation is to consider the photographs Shahn made in the fall of 1935 in the southern United States from West Virginia to Louisiana. Combining the techniques of his early street photography with the social and historical motives of the documentary tradition, Shahn recorded an enduring social study of the depression-era South. He observed a culture both tied to and torn apart by its own history. As a photographer, Shahn shunned the sentimental in favor of the substantive. He was disarmed by the suffering of others. Many of his photographs are deliberately partisan. Others suggest cultural readings more acute than Shahn may have intended. Shahn later recounted that his travels as a government photographer altered his perception both of himself and his art. At the time, the

photographs he made for the RA/FSA were politically persuasive. In retrospect, we can see that they are among his most powerful social and political work. Without federal assistance during the Great Depression, many people in the South could not have survived. Roosevelt's assistance programs provided emergency relief for many. Other New Deal initiatives laid the groundwork for the revisions that would eventually lead to labor reform, desegregation, economic revision and a new era in the South.

This study brings to light a critical phase in Shahn's career, a moment that by his own account, marks a turning point in his aesthetic and social consciousness. Moreover, this study proposes a greater appreciation for this substantial body of work and insight into its meaning and effect. It corrects an imbalance in the existing scholarship on Ben Shahn's oeuvre, adds to the research on RA/FSA photography and redresses a lacuna in the history of photography.

In Chapter I, "Art and Politics: The Task of Photography in New Deal Ideology," I establish how Shahn became a mediator between a powerful centralized federal bureaucracy and the southern people, and how his photographs reveal a commitment to both. I examine his photographs in the context of the agencies that originally commissioned them, the institutions that gave them status and the context of the history of photography. I provide the framework for the era

and the history of the establishment of the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (later absorbed by the Department of Agriculture and renamed the Farm Security Administration). Shahn's artistic path intersects propitiously with New Deal initiatives in 1935, the year he joined the Resettlement Administration. I trace Shahn's preceding development as an artist dedicated to social and political issues and his concurrent interest in photography. Government officials, aware of the persuasive, even propagandistic power of social commentary and photographic imagery, devised an elaborate public relations initiative to help gain support for and diffuse opposition to New Deal relief and recovery programs. I review the ways the RA/FSA photographs were distributed. I discuss the degree to which Shahn was complicit with New Deal motives and the position of his work vis-a-vis revisionist critiques of documentary truth and "victim" photography.

Chapters II-V are devoted to a sociological reading of the photographs Ben Shahn made in 1935, while driving "through Kentucky, West Virginia, down to Arkansas and Mississippi, Louisiana...in other words...the mine country and cotton country."³ The quality of life for most people living in the South during the 1930s fell far below the national average. To investigate more fully the relationship

³Doud, interview with Ben Shahn, 14 April 1964. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

of Shahn's photography to the historical and social forces that defined the South during the depression, it is important to diffuse romantic myths of the Old South, with chivalrous gentry and benign segregation, and investigate the stark reality of fulsome extremes of wealth and poverty and unfortunate capitulation that unfair labor practices imposed on the disempowered.⁴ To the observant eye of Ben Shahn, independent-minded mountaineers from the Ozarks, miners in southern Appalachia, tenant farmers and sharecroppers and trappers in the cotton belt were all stifled by rigid, immobile class stratification, racism, poverty and exploitative labor practices. Shahn photographed these situations with compassion. He also photographed the southern people in the context of their culture, at home among their extended families, gathered together for church services, funerals, county fairs or simply passing time sitting on a stoop.

⁴The fascination with the mystique of the antebellum south began to appear in popular culture around the turn of the century, coincidentally during the Gilded Age when robber barons reached the height of their powers. For a discussion of the portrayal of the antebellum south in literature and commercial film see Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr. *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the southern myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1981). In 1930, because of their concern about Hollywood links with Wall Street and Washington, novelist, dramatists and independent film makers formed the Workers Film and Photo League. They wanted to present an unidealized version of the working class and labor struggles in American life. Peter Stead. *Film and the working class: The feature film in British and American Society* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 76.

Precise dating of these photographs is complicated by the fact that Shahn kept no diaries documenting his movements or reactions, and he returned most of his film to Washington for developing and printing.⁵ There, rolls of film were processed in batches. The dates assigned by the Resettlement Administration are the processing dates. With the assistance of Bernarda Bryson Shahn, I have been able to reconstruct roughly the route the Shahns took.

In Chapter II, "Miners and Mountaineers," I examine the photographs that Shahn made in Appalachia and the Ozarks. Bernarda Bryson Shahn drove her future husband -- who did not drive -- in a Model A Ford from the District of Columbia to the coal mining regions in the border states of Kentucky and West Virginia. They arrived in West Virginia on the heels of a mine strike. Many miners had returned to work, but their living and working conditions had improved only marginally.

Further southwest, in the Ozarks, employment was scarce. Destitute and displaced mountaineers were restless and concerned about how to provide for their families. In rural communities, the family is more than an emotional or cultural entity, it is also an economic unit held together by

⁵Shahn sent some of his film to New York for developing. He also did some of his own printing after he returned to Washington, but because the job was too time consuming, Shahn allowed assistants to handle most of the printing. Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and Its People 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 46.

necessity. The children who lived through the Great Depression did not escape the trials of these bitter years; relocation disrupted their lives further. Only rarely was migration the solution to the problems of unskilled and unemployed workers and their families.

In Chapter III, "The Cotton Kingdom: Segregation and Subjectivity," I focus on a selection of photographs Shahn made of tenant farmers and sharecroppers in Arkansas. Race was an evident factor in southern labor practice so I begin this chapter with an overview of the status of the racial divide as Shahn observed it in the 1930s. I proceed to an analysis of his photographs of African-American cotton workers. Throughout the depression, cotton remained the number one cash crop in the South. The labor systems utilized in its production, sharecropping and tenant farming, were reformed only gradually as New Deal initiatives helped to modernize and mechanize American agriculture. In 1934, a group of Arkansas tenant farmers began organizing the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. A year later they called for a strike, and Shahn and Bryson drove to the strike site and nearby cotton fields. There he made photographs that detail the autumn harvest and capture the dawn-to-dusk drudgery of picking cotton by hand.

In Chapter IV, "The Artist Among the Churchgoers," I discuss a selection of photographs by Shahn that loosely or directly refer to the observance of religion in the South.

Shahn referred to many of these photographs later as he was producing his "Sunday Paintings." In contrast to the analytical and formal approach of his colleague Walker Evans, Shahn adopted a more sociological slant. In contrast to the critical and appropriative position taken by Margaret Bourke-White, Shahn assumed a more sanguine approach. I demonstrate here that Shahn did not set out to analyze religious beliefs per se, but in the process of recounting the significant events in the lives of ordinary people, he made many photographs that signify the overpowering presence and influence of religion on the structure of social norms, politics and labor.

In Chapter V, "Old Times on the Mississippi," I address the southern psychological preoccupation with the past, melancholia and loss and photography's theoretical relationship to the same issues. I use a selection of photographs that Shahn made along the Mississippi River to demonstrate how memory, myth and fact are manifested in documents that are at once nostalgic and empirical.

My study examines Shahn's career during a very narrow time period. Pertinent information concerning the artist's life is interwoven with the text. A detailed chronology follows in an Appendix.

Many monographic studies have been written on other RA/FSA photographers, some well-known such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and some little-known, such

as Marion Post Wolcott. There are two monographic books on Shahn's photography: *Ben Shahn: Photographer* by Margaret R. Weiss and *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn* by Davis Pratt. While both volumes include many of Shahn's photographs, each has only a brief introduction by the author.

In the 1930s, Shahn's photographs were reproduced in pamphlets and brochures published by the Resettlement Administration. They were used to illustrate articles that appeared in the popular photo magazines *Look*, *Life* and *Fortune*, as well as the leading social reform periodical of the 1930s *Survey Graphic*. Shahn's photographs have been included, although not discussed at length, in numerous books on the RA/FSA photographers notably *The Bitter Years 1934-41: Rural America as Seen by the Photographers of the Farm Security Administration* edited by Edward Steichen; *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* by Jack Hurley; *In This Proud Land, America 1935-1943, as Seen in the FSA Photographs* by Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, *A Vision Shared, A Classic Portrait of American and Its People, 1935-1943* by Hank O'Neal and more recently in *America Photographers of the Depression: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1935-1942* by Charles Hagan (1985); *Official Images: New Deal Photography* edited by Pete Daniel and Sally Stein and *Symbols of Ideal life: Social Documentary Photography in America 1890-1950* by Maren Stange. An essay by Carl Fleischhauer and

Beverly W. Brannan on Shahn's photographs of Arkansas cotton workers appears in the book they edited, *Documenting America: 1935-1943*. My article "Ben Shahn: The Road South," appears in the spring 1995 special edition of *History of Photography* devoted to southern photography.

Monographs on Shahn which mention his photographic career include *Ben Shahn* written by Bernarda Bryson Shahn, the artist's widow; *Portrait of an Artist as an American* by Seldon Rodman and *Ben Shahn* by John D. Morse. Frances Pohl has written two books on Shahn. In *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954* (1988) she cites numerous photographs as source material for later paintings and posters. Pohl considers Shahn's work in the context of a the political climate of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In her recent book, *Ben Shahn* (1993), a less theoretical survey of the artist's entire career, she again presents numerous examples of Shahn's use of photography as source material for paintings and graphics. Pohl does not, however, discuss Shahn in the context of photographic theory or history.

Shahn's photographs have been featured in one-person exhibitions: "Ben Shahn," the major retrospective organized by James Thrall Soby for the Museum of Modern Art (1947), "Ben Shahn as Photographer," Fogg Art Museum (1969), "Ben Shahn: A Retrospective 1898-1969," The Jewish Museum, New York (1977), "Ben Shahn, Photographs from the FSA Files," Center Gallery, University of Maine at Portland-Gorham

(November 10-December 15, 1976), "Ben Shahn/The Thirties," Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (1977), "Vintage Ben Shahn Photographs," William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs (November 28-December 22, 1988), "Ben Shahn Photographs," Photofind Gallery, New York (January 14-February 14, 1986), "Ben Shahn Photographs," Pembroke Gallery, Houston, Texas (February 27-April 5, 1986), "Ben Shahn in Ohio: The Summer of 1938," Upper Arlington Cultural Arts Commission, Upper Arlington, Ohio (May 15-June 24, 1988) and "Ben Shahn and the Task of Photography in Thirties America," Hunter College of the City University of New York (February 8-March 25, 1995 with additional venues at The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia and the Tampa Museum of Art, Florida through October 1995).

Shahn's photographs have been included in numerous group exhibitions from the 1930s until the present that focus on the RA/FSA photographs including, "Documentary Photographs from the Files of the Resettlement Administration," Grand Central Palace, New York, (1938); "Photographs from the Farm Security Administration," Museum of Modern Art, New York (1938); "Ohio: A Photographic Portrait 1935-1941: Farm Security Administration Photographs," Akron Art Institute, Akron, Ohio (1980), "Of Earth and Cotton," McKissick Museum of Art, Culture and Science, Columbia, South Carolina (1994 with a national tour through 1997).

During the 1940s and 1950s, abstract art, especially that range supported by Clement Greenberg, dominated critical and curatorial practice. Realism and political art fell into disfavor. Nevertheless, it was during this period that photography secured a place in the canon of modern art practice in the United States. As Christopher Phillips chronicles in "The Judgment Seat of Photography," the institutionalization of photography in museum, gallery and collecting practices in America was determined to a large degree by the sequence of formidable photography curators at the Museum of Modern Art, Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen and John Szarkowski. All three curators supported Shahn's work but for different reasons. Steichen included a 1935 RA/FSA photograph of an Arkansas rehabilitation client by Shahn (Fig. 5) in his widely seen exhibition, "The Family of Man." Newhall and Szarkowski were more interested in aesthetics and connoisseurship than content, a position that scanted the sociological aspects of Shahn's work.

Recently, John Tagg has argued persuasively in "The Currency of Photography" and *The Burden of Representation* for a more sociological analysis of photography, taking into consideration not only the institutions that have given photography status but also the historical and cultural context in which the photography was originally made. Inspired by Walter Benjamin, critics Susan Sontag, Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau

and Trinh T. Minh-ha have debated the credibility of documentary truth and the meaning of photographs within social institutions. In light of these revisionist perspectives, I discuss Shahn's highly-charged political agenda, his bureaucratic alliances, his relationship to his subjects, his perception of the southern culture and how these factors are intentionally and at times unintentionally manifested in his 1935 photographs.

Ben Shahn's status as a social artist is above reproach. His response to the living and working conditions of the depression-era South has been largely unstudied until now. This dissertation is the first to examine in depth the sociological aspects of Shahn's 1935 photographs and the historical and cultural context of their production. These photographs epitomize an American tradition born of the interplay of the vernacular and cultivated traditions. Throughout his career in the fine arts, Shahn maintained a strong commitment to the working class. The photographs discussed in this dissertation reveal Shahn's response to some of the tragedies brought on by the Great Depression and his purview of the endemic problems that characterized the American South in the 1930s. Shahn believed that it was the province of the artist to minister to the spirit of man and that art had the power to change society.⁶ He was

⁶Bernarda Bryson Shahn, *Ben Shahn* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), p. 266.

particularly well-suited to be an emissary for a government dedicated to assistance and reform. His photographs are integral to his larger standing in the histories of twentieth-century art and photography. The legacy of his southern photography is not limited to its usefulness in the 1930s, or its part in our collective memory of the Depression era. These photographs speak softly of the enduring human condition and Ben Shahn's relentless concern for justice.

CHAPTER ONE

Art and Politics: The Task of Photography in
New Deal Ideology

The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory.

John Berger¹

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office as President of the United States on March 4, 1933, the nation was in the throes of its most devastating crisis since the Civil War. The national income was approximately half of what it had been before the stock market crash of 1929. About one third of the labor force was unemployed.² The system of representative democracy appeared ineffectual in dealing with the dire economic problems. President Herbert Hoover's response to the nation's distress had been less than dynamic. Consequently, voters placed their faith in Roosevelt and his

¹John Berger. *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 58.

²In March of 1933, there were 12,500,000 unemployed in the United States. The money income was less than one half of what it had been in 1929. Fon W. Boardman, Jr., *The Thirties: America and the Great Depression* (New York: Henry Z. Walck, Inc., 1967), p. 64.

promise of a New Deal.³

Roosevelt's first priority was to stabilize the banking system. He immediately called for a bank holiday while Secretary of the Treasury, William Woodin, and E.A. Goldenwieser of the Federal Reserve Board devised new banking regulations. The Emergency Bank Act was passed by Congress on March 9, less than one week after Roosevelt's inauguration.

Roosevelt next turned his attention to the urgent need of America's farmers. During the presidential campaign, Roosevelt contended that insufficient farm income was the root of the Depression. He fervently believed that agricultural income was the key to recovery.⁴

Photography came to have an important connection to New Deal ideology, most significantly through an unlikely association with agriculture. Roosevelt, our first media savvy president, utilized radio, newsreels and printed photography to an unprecedented degree to advance his own career and to promote the New Deal. Indeed, photography became an effective means of influencing public opinion.

In this chapter I examine the federal agency most

³At the 1932 National Democratic convention, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people." The organ then played "Happy Days are Here Again." Boardman, p. 31.

⁴Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), pp. 147 and 156.

sophisticated in the utilization of photography for political ends, the Resettlement Administration later reorganized under the Department of Agriculture as the Farm Security Administration. I discuss Shahn's development as a social realist and photographer as well as his role in advancing New Deal initiatives.

**A. The Establishment of the Information Division
of the Resettlement Administration**

When the stock market collapsed in October of 1929, the commodities market had already been in a deep recession for nearly a decade. A buildup of international trade during World War I had brought prosperity to the world's farmers. American farmers bought new equipment and expanded their operations to meet the growing demand. When the war was over, foreign markets declined leaving American farmers unprepared for the downward trend. The farm community was devastated. By 1932, the net income of farm operators in the United States had dropped to less than one third of what it had been only three years earlier when the stock market collapsed.⁵

Roosevelt's advisors on agricultural policies included the new Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, and the

⁵Susan Archer Mann. *Agrarian Capitalism in Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 99.

Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Rexford Guy Tugwell. Tugwell, an economics professor from Columbia University, had met Roosevelt while the latter was governor of New York. The governor was impressed with Tugwell's understanding of the agricultural economics of New York state. When Roosevelt became President-elect, he asked Tugwell to join the "Brain Trust" and transition team.⁶ Tugwell introduced Roosevelt to Henry Agard Wallace. Wallace, a former Republican, an Iowa farmer, the editor and publisher of an agricultural newspaper, was also the son of President Harding's Secretary of Agriculture. He had studied botany at Iowa State Agricultural College under George Washington Carver and was an expert on plants and farming. He was politically adept yet remained an ideologue. Roosevelt saw in Wallace an unusual combination of talent and experience that would be helpful to his administration. He asked Wallace to be Secretary of Agriculture.⁷

Early in 1933, Wallace, Tugwell, who was by then Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, and a group of advisors devised the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) with the broad

⁶The assemblage of academics surrounding Roosevelt was labeled the "Brains Trust" by *The New York Times* reporter, James Kieran. McElvaine, p. 124. See also Rexford Tugwell, *The Brains Trust* (New York: Viking, 1968). These advisors are referred to more often today as the "Brain Trust," and I shall use the latter term throughout this dissertation.

⁷Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), pp. 28-29.

objectives of stabilizing markets by reducing the number of acres in production, developing immediate and long-range conservation policies and helping farmers secure a fair share of the national income. According to the AAA regulations, landowners were paid subsidies to reduce the number of acres in production. In cases where acreage was already planted, crops were turned under. Young pigs were slaughtered before maturing into marketable hogs. Crop reduction and subsidy programs were designed to bring supply in line with demand, stabilize prices and increase profits for American farmers. But in a nation where hunger was a mounting concern, this policy seemed ludicrous to many. Some Senators and farmers wanted production to continue unabated and for government to offer price support and send the surplus abroad. Despite some opposition in Congress, the Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed into law in May of 1933.⁸

By the time the 73rd Congress adjourned on June 15, 1933, the new president had pushed through legislation establishing the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and enacting the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), the

⁸Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas called for the William Jennings Bryan type of agrarianism using monetary inflation as a means of creating a more favorable balance of trade for farmers. Thomas was able to have an amendment supporting monetary inflation attached to the Agricultural Adjustment Act. For a comprehensive discussion of farm policy and politics during Roosevelt's first administration. Schlesinger, pp. 18-84; Mann, pp. 100-103 and Jack Temple Kirby, "A New Deal for the Cotton South," *Southern Exposure* (Vol. 15, no. 1, 1987), pp. 50-53.

Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act, the Farm Credit Act, the Truth-in-Securities Act and the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).⁹

The first one hundred days of Roosevelt's first administration were not without controversy or repercussions. The farm package which included AAA with the Thomas Amendment, the Emergency Farm Mortgage and the Farm Credit Act incited fervent opposition from Democrats as well as Republicans.¹⁰ It was obvious that wealthy landowners would benefit from farm subsidies. When concern was expressed about the welfare of tenant farmers and sharecroppers, Secretary Wallace verbally guaranteed that subsidies would be shared fairly by landowners, sharecroppers and tenant farmers; however, nothing was written into the bill to enforce this policy.¹¹ Massive numbers of tenants were evicted and complaints poured into Washington. Jerome Frank and Alger Hiss, lawyers for the AAA, responded by writing the controversial Section (7) provision which would have added explicit protection for tenant farmers. The provision was unenforceable and their efforts polarized the AAA and

⁹See "'Action, and Action Now': The Hundred Days and Beyond," in McElvaine, pp. 138-169.

¹⁰Evans C. Johnson, "John H. Bankhead: Advocate of Cotton," *Alabama Review* (Vol. 41, no. 1, 1988), pp. 30-58.

¹¹Mann, p. 101.

resulted in their dismissal in early 1935.¹²

In 1934, the nation experienced a severe drought. Fallow fields eroded rapidly. The government revised earlier planting restrictions and encouraged growing grasses in order to anchor topsoil. Farmers, displaced by eviction or foreclosure, migrated westward in search of more productive land or temporary work, only to find disappointment further west. In California, destitute migrants lived in temporary camps. By summer of 1935, the commodities markets were stabilizing but many farmers were still homeless, hungry and unemployed.¹³ Federal efforts on behalf of the American farmers had produced only minimal improvement; and indeed, despite unprecedented efforts by the President and Congress to both relieve suffering and stimulate the economy, the Depression continued.

According to the economic theory of John Maynard Keynes, increased spending would lead to recovery. In the absence of free market stimulation, the influx of revenue must be provided by government. As the election of 1936 approached the majority of the nation's voting block was disgruntled. Roosevelt never fully embraced the Keynesian program; however, mindful that Hoover's lackadaisical response to

¹²Kirby, pp. 50-53. See also Jack Temple Kirby. *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

¹³Johnson, p. 30.

economic reform had cost the former President the 1932 election, Roosevelt moved toward the Keynesian prescription.

As noted by historian Robert McElvaine, "Very broadly speaking, there have been two opposing sets of values in America. Both are individualist; but one emphasizes cooperation, the other competition." Commenting on the turn in values by leading theoreticians in the 1930s, McElvaine said,

Progress, always a central icon in the American secular faith, no longer seemed viable. As they rejected the greed and materialism they associated with American capitalism, scores of leading thinkers turned to Marx for a possible new value system. Marxism was 'in the air' in intellectual circles in the thirties, and its spirit was in harmony with the values developing among much of the general public.¹⁴

For many Marxism was a way of providing economic security for the greatest number of people, but for others a move toward collectivism through the redistribution of wealth and income was associated with Communism. Communism was in the minds of most Americans a dogmatic, authoritarian, and Godless ideology.

The publisher, William Randolph Hearst, announced that the Roosevelt administration was "more communistic than the communists," and he personally sponsored a campaign to expose "reds" on college and university campuses. In 1934,

¹⁴McElvaine, pp. 202-206

Elizabeth Dilling published *The Red Network* a listing of 1300 communist conspirators which includes the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt.¹⁵

In addition to the hurdles of organizing new agencies and initiatives for providing aid and assistance to American farmers, the administration faced the problem of diffusing Roosevelt's detractors who resented centralized government, a further build up of the federal bureaucracy or an American agricultural program that in any way resembled the communist vision advanced by Stalin's successive five-year agricultural plans.¹⁶

In 1935 the Resettlement Administration (RA) was established, and Assistant Secretary for Agriculture, Rexford Guy Tugwell, was named its administrator. The Resettlement Administration instituted additional policies for rebuilding unproductive land, preventing soil erosion, encouraging

¹⁵McElvaine, p. 204.

¹⁶Palmer, R.R., "Stalin: The Five-Year Plans and the Purges," in *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 737-739.

Agrarians and American Socialists were also at odds with certain aspects of New Deal reform especially with regard to land distribution. These Leftist movements, which favored nationalized agriculture, were not targeted for conversion to state-centered support initiatives. Jess Gilbert and Steve Brown, "Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s: The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *Agricultural History* 55, October 1981, pp. 351-369, and Jess Gilbert and Carolyn Howe, "Beyond 'State vs. Society': Theories of the State and New Deal Agricultural Policies," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 56 (April, 1991), pp. 204-220.

reforestation and curbing stream pollution and flooding. Displaced farmers were eligible for low-interest loans and subsistence housing. Next, the Roosevelt administration instigated a plan for resettling displaced farm workers, retiring exhausted land and revitalizing depleted soil through fertilization or crop rotation.¹⁷

Realizing public support for the goals of the Resettlement Administration would not be automatic, Tugwell devised an elaborate information program to popularize the agency. The task for the media, in general, and photography, in particular, was to inform and educate the public. The responsibilities of the Information Division, headed by John Franklin Carter, were organized and divided as follows:

(1) The Editorial Section handled news releases, bulletins, circulars, etc. Its goal was to educate the public and the agency's personnel about the Resettlement Administration;

(2) The Publications Section furnished information and prepared articles for periodicals, magazines and features in syndicated publications;

(3) The Historical Section provided photographs of life in America. The photographs were available free of charge for exhibition or publication. The photographs were used to illustrate the need for the agency's relief and recovery programs. As recovery began to take effect, photographs were made to document the positive accomplishments of the agency;

(4) The Radio Section disseminated information and

¹⁷Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Federal and State Extension Services Files, National Archives, Washington, DC.

dramatized the agency's work through the medium of radio;

(5) The Documentary Film Section produced and distributed documentary films that chronicled the living and working conditions throughout America.¹⁸

Documentary photographers and film makers recorded virtually every aspect of American life as well as the government's activities from the construction of new federal buildings to the distribution of relief checks to the meandering of unemployed migratory workers.

During the Great Depression, the federal government became the leading patron of the arts in the United States. Painters, sculptors, graphic artists, muralists, actors, writers and folklorists worked under the auspices of various government programs, many of them designed specifically to provide work for the creative community. The photographers hired by the federal government during the Depression came from various backgrounds. Some were commercial photographers; others were photojournalists. Still others such as Walker Evans considered themselves fine arts photographers. Nevertheless the principle reason for hiring photographers was not to support their artistic careers but to accumulate visual information related to the Department of the Interior, the Rural Electrification Administration, the

¹⁸Sidney Baldwin. *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 117.

Soil Conservation Service as well as the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration.¹⁹ Photographers were employed to gather documentary evidence of the status of the nation.

The term "documentary" was first used in 1926, by the English sociologist, John Grierson (1899-1972), to distinguish non-fiction films, especially those of Robert Flaherty, from commercial, Hollywood productions. Grierson felt the documentary film maker could dramatize "the real world" in a meaningful way that would do more than explain -- it would inspire. For Grierson the social inflection was intentional; he did not disparage the propagandistic impact; he saw the cinema as a 'pulpit'.²⁰

Grierson's brand of socialistically inclined films caught on and inspired the organization of cine-clubs in Europe and America. A group of New York photographers and filmmakers started the Workers' Film and Photo League in 1930. At the time fiction film was in the midst of the opulent Busby Berkeley era, and non-fiction topics were probed by

¹⁹For the most comprehensive survey to date of the photographic projects in the various governmental agencies see Pete Daniel, et. al., *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

²⁰Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 85. See also Beaumont Newhall, "A Backward Glance at Documentary," *Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography*, David Featherstone, ed. (Carmel, California: Friends of Photography, 1984), p. 1.

newsreels.²¹ The Film and Photo League attracted the talents of Margaret Bourke-White, Berenice Abbot, Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, Leo Hurwitz and Herbert Klein. Later Steiner, Strand, Hurwitz and Klein joined Pare Lorentz in the film division of the Resettlement Administration. There they produced the powerfully persuasive documentary films *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, *The River* and *The City*.²²

New Deal administrators were cognizant of the persuasive and propagandistic power of the media. Their plan to enlist, even manipulate, perceived photographic truth for humanistic

²¹The similarities and differences between fiction and nonfiction film of the 1930s is fertile ground for investigation but goes beyond the scope of this dissertation. Film historian Dana Benelli has posited that the two genres often pursued similar subject matter, shared aesthetic principles and marketing strategies. He believes that in the 1930s the movie going public was especially receptive to films dealing with topical issues. Still, movies such as King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929) and *Our Daily Bread* (1934) were exceptional in 1930s Hollywood. In 1937 when *The March of Time* received an Academy Award for revolutionizing newsreels by tackling hard-hitting issues, the *Motion Picture Herald* warned this policy would destroy "the public's escape from the bitter realities, the anguishes and the turmoil of life." Dana Benelli, "Jungles and National Landscapes: Documentary and the Hollywood Cinema in the 1930s," (Diss. University of Iowa, 1992); "Topicality and Timeliness in the American Cinema of the 1930s," paper presented at Society for Cinema Studies Conference, Washington, DC, May 1990; "The Travelogue and Classical Hollywood Cinema," Documenting Fictions Conference, Luxembourg City, June 1993; and Barnouw, 121-123.

²²Veterans of the Film and Photo League also formed Frontier Films and produced feature-length dramatizations of social issues such as Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz's *Native Land* (1942). Barnouw, pp. 90-111, 121-123.

and political ends was deliberate.²³ Tugwell understood how "social" photography could effectively alter if not create the public's perception of and response to the Resettlement Administration initiatives. Ten years earlier in 1925, Tugwell had hired Roy E. Stryker to organize the photographic material for *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement*, a book he was co-writing with Thomas Munro.²⁴

Stryker was not a photographer. At the time he was a graduate student in economics at Columbia University. In looking for photographs to illustrate the text for the Tugwell and Munro book, he came across the work of a nineteenth century Danish sociologist and police reporter, Jacob Riis. Riis photographed the New York slums and published his photographs and commentary in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). As a reporter and reformer Riis wanted his photographs to call attention to the deplorable squalor of the tenements where a million and a half residents, mostly recent immigrants, suffered because of discrimination, poverty, and mercenary and insensitive landlords and

²³Photography had previously been enlisted for political ends. See Donald English. *The Political Uses of Photography in the Third Republic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1988) and Ernest K. Bramsted. *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda: 1925-1945* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1965).

²⁴F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1972), pp. 14-16.

employers.²⁵

Stryker was moved by Riis' photographs and those of his near contemporary, Lewis Hine. Hine was also a social reformer who began his New York career by photographing immigrants entering Ellis Island. By 1907, Hine had set himself up as a "social photographer," and in 1917, he became the staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee. His moving images of children in factories, mines and fields were published in magazines, books and pamphlets in order to draw public attention to the urgent need for child labor laws. Stryker selected the photographs for *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* on the strength of their power to dramatize the text. Over one third of the illustrations he selected for the book were photographs by Hine.²⁶

In July of 1935 at the request of Tugwell, Stryker moved to Washington to become Chief of the Historical Section of the Information Division of the Resettlement Administration. As Chief he was expected to "direct the activities of investigators, photographers, economists, sociologists and statisticians engaged in the accumulation and compilation of"

²⁵Jacob A. Riis. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971, originally published by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

²⁶Rexford Tugwell, Thomas Munro and Roy E. Stryker *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1925).

materials essential for an accurate description of the activities of the Resettlement Administration.²⁷

Soon after Stryker arrived in Washington, he realized that details relating to photographic matters were dispersed among several divisions of the Resettlement Administration. He complained to Tugwell whose response was to put Stryker in charge of coordinating all photographic support within the Resettlement Administration including that performed by the Suburban Resettlement Administration and several other small divisions. Stryker's dream was to gather together a comprehensive photographic encyclopedia of life in the United States and then offer the photographs free of charge for exhibition or publication.

First, Stryker needed to set up a darkroom and hire a staff of photographers. He contacted a young photojournalist named Arthur Rothstein who had taken photographs for the campus newspaper and yearbook at Columbia University. Rothstein agreed to move to Washington to oversee the darkroom for Stryker and to supervise the technical aspects of the agency. Stryker inherited the photographer Carl Mydans from the Suburban Resettlement Administration. An employee of the Subsistence Housing Program named Ernestine Evans arranged for Stryker to meet her friend, Walker Evans. Recognizing Evans' extraordinary talent, Stryker hired him as

²⁷Hurley, p. 36.

the Senior Information Specialist. Ernestine Evans recommended another talented young man for a position in the Resettlement Administration. He was Ben Shahn.

B. Ben Shahn, social realist and photographer

By 1935 Shahn's fervent commitment to social and political issues was well-established. During the late 1920s, he lived in Paris and painted in a style related to impressionism and post-impressionism, but even then he felt that this style did not adequately reflect his inner voice.²⁸ While in Paris, Shahn participated in protest demonstrations and became increasingly politically active. There he began devising a new painting style that he felt was more effective for expressing his beliefs and social commitments.

In 1929, Shahn returned to the United States. That year he met the photographer Walker Evans at the home of a mutual friend, Dr. Iago Galdson. Evans moved into the ground-floor studio of Shahn's house on Bethune Street. The two artists also spent several summers together in Truro, Massachusetts. In the summer of 1930, they decided to exhibit their work in a two-person show in a neighbor's barn.²⁹ Evans exhibited photographs and Shahn exhibited a series of paintings he had

²⁸Ben Shahn. *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 107.

²⁹Morris Dorsky, "The Formative Years of Ben Shahn: The Origin and Development of His Style," (M.A. Thesis, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, 1966), p. 53.

made on the subject of the Alfred Dreyfus Affair, the case of the Jewish officer in the French Army falsely accused of being a spy and traitor.³⁰

Shahn started keeping files of clippings of newspaper photographs and purchased photographs in the late 1920s, but the first time he used photographs as source material was for the Dreyfus series.³¹ He referred to photographs that were published in a small book (now lost) he had purchased while living in Paris. The Dreyfus paintings are executed in a painterly style that owes more to Matisse than to photography. The formal aspects of photography, reduced depth of field, cropping and flattened contours, are more apparent, however, in *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, the powerfully moving series exhibited at the Downtown Gallery in 1932.

³⁰Ziva Amishai-Maisels points out that in the 1930s, Shahn was trying to assimilate into "a secular Christian society." She maintains that even though he had experienced anti-semitism in his youth, what attracted Shahn to the Dreyfus case was not his interest in Jewish persecution but a general proclivity for the "victimization of the innocent underdog." After the liberation of the death camps in 1944, Shahn and other American Jewish artists re-identified with Judaism. "Ben Shahn and the problem of Jewish identity," *Jewish Art*, Vol 12-13, 1986-76, p. 304.

³¹Shahn maintained extensive files that included not only newspaper clippings and loose images from other sources but also copies of his own photographs. The files were labeled miners, labor, strikes, demonstrations, cotton, tobacco, children, floods, etc., and were in the artist's possession at the time of his death. His widow, Bernarda Shahn, subsequently donated them to the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washinton, DC.

Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants and anarchists, had been convicted and executed in Massachusetts for the murder of a paymaster despite the testimony of several eye-witnesses who declared that the two defendants were miles away from the scene at the time of the crime.³²

For likenesses of the defendants, prosecutors and judges Shahn referred to newspaper photographs and illustrations in pamphlets published by Sacco and Vanzetti defence committees that he found at the New York Public Library.³³ It was at this time that Shahn abandoned the curvilinear figuration of the earlier Dreyfus paintings and developed his signature style which expresses sarcasm as biting as that of George Grosz and humanity as playful as that of Honoré Daumier. James Thrall Soby, the writer and curator, said Shahn was able to combine "the lessons of Cubism and abstraction with a new realism of subject and technique."³⁴ His flat planes of

³²In 1927, Shahn witnessed demonstrations in Paris protesting the conviction and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. At the time, the case was the *cause célèbre* of liberals in both Europe and America, and Shahn's motivation grew out of his conviction of their innocence. In a recent study, Paul Avrich has explored the anarchists' background and personal histories. His findings expose the mishandling of the case and demonstrate that it is impossible from our present day vantage point to ever know for certain whether they were innocent or guilty. *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

³³Dorsky, p. 66.

³⁴James Thrall Soby papers, Box I, folder 42, Museum of Modern Art, Archives, New York.

color, tilted perspectives, expansive voids and realism as subject are also attributable to the lessons of the camera.

In the early 1930s, Shahn began making his own photographs. According to standard sources, he acquired a 35 mm. Leica camera as a settlement of a wager he made with his brother Phil. The brothers agreed that if Ben could get at least one photograph published from his first roll of film, Phil would pay for the camera. Shahn was, for the most part, self taught. He did get some laconic but important technical advice on how to set f-stops on the Leica camera from Evans, who one day as he was leaving the studio turned to Shahn and quipped the instructions to set the camera at, "f/9 on the sunny side of the street, f/4.5 on the shady side of the street, for 1/20th of a second, hold the camera steady."³⁵ Twelve of Shahn's early photographs were published in the November 1934 issue of *New Theatre* magazine in a photo essay titled, "The Theatre of New York." Judith Shahn remembers her father making family photographs as early as 1931. She believes he owned several cameras besides the Leica and that he occasionally borrowed cameras from Evans. She also remembers the dark room in their Bethune Street brownstone and seeing her father develop his own pictures.³⁶

³⁵Henry Brandon, "Art & Egghead, a conversation with Ben Shahn," *The New Republic* (7 July 1958), p. 18.

³⁶Judith Shahn interview with the author, January 6, 1995.

Shahn said in the 1964 interview with Richard Doud that

In an interview with Katherine Kuh, Shahn said, "I took it [photography] up to help me sharpen my vision of the specific. I felt very strongly that I could arrive at broad generalizations about human beings through sharpened observation of the specific."³⁷ Shahn used his own photographs to assist him in remembering details of things he had seen and wanted to incorporate into later paintings.³⁸ The camera served as a shortcut to sketching, and the spontaneity of the medium allowed him to freeze fleeting moments for later study, but as his desire to publish his photographs and present them in a public arena proves, he considered his photographs finished work and not just source material. Shahn was foremost a social artist. The medium for his message was a secondary consideration. He said, "I find difficulty in making distinctions between photography

he never used a light meter or a flash attachment and that he was "very fond of the German film called Perritzbrömena ... which [was] very, very fine grain and [was] very slow." Most of the RA/FSA photographs were made with Kodak film, however. Richard Doud, interview with Ben Shahn, 14 April 1964, Ben Shahn papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³⁷Margaret R. Weiss, *Ben Shahn Photographer, An Album from the Thirties* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), n.p.

³⁸Interview, Saul Benison and Ben Shahn, October 29, 1956. Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York. Shahn also stated that his first publication was in a "theater magazine." Frances Pohl incorrectly cites *Theater Arts* 1934 as the first time a Shahn photograph was published, Frances Pohl, *Ben Shahn* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Art books, 1993), p. 15.

and painting. Both are pictures." Both have the power to convey a message.³⁹

As Shahn's interest in photography increased, he and Evans talked about collaborating on a photography book they would call, "How and What Not to Photograph." They agreed that the first subjects "not" to be photographed would be "nude women with crystal balls,"⁴⁰ the Pictorialist subject par-excellence. Shahn and Evans disparaged the soft-focus pictorialism which by the 1930s had been reduced to cliché.⁴¹ They were far more impressed by the early photographs of Paul Strand.

Before Paul Strand became occupied with cubist innovations and abstraction, he was taking "straight" photographs of pedestrians on the streets of New York City. It is likely that Shahn had seen reproductions of the photographs in the June 1917 issue of *Camera Work* (Figs. 6

³⁹Davis Pratt, *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. viii.

⁴⁰John D. Morse. *Ben Shahn* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p. 135.

⁴¹Walker Evans scholar, Jeff Rosenheim, believes that the extent of Evans' influence on Shahn as a photographer has been overestimated. He contends that Shahn was far more at ease with a hand-held camera than Evans and that, in fact, several photographs attributed to Evans were by Shahn. He will publish his findings in an exhibition catalog that accompanies a Walker Evans exhibition being organized for The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Interviews with the author, January 5, 1994.

and 7). Learning from Strand, Shahn often turned his attention to the individual in the urban setting. His pedestrian subjects included street vendors, the homeless (Fig. 8), neighbors sitting on their stoop and merchants outside of their shops (Fig. 9). The influence of Strand's well-known view of Wall Street (Fig. 10) is apparent in Shahn's photograph of East 12th Street in which a lone pedestrian dwarfed by tall buildings on either side walks west toward the Third Avenue elevated train (Fig. 11).

From the Bowery (Fig. 12) to Willis Avenue (Fig. 13), from Little Italy to the Grand Concourse, from Harlem to South Street (Fig. 14), Shahn recorded the essence of urban life. He claimed photography was the clearest way to communicate in human terms.⁴² Shahn's success in achieving candor was due in part to his having a right-angle view finder attachment on his Leica camera. The attachment allowed him to face straight ahead while photographing the subject on his right without his or her knowledge. This was not an uncommon practice. Strand and Evans had similar attachments. In a 1938 photograph of an Ohio farmer looking into a pawn shop window, we see reflected in the glass window the image of Shahn standing at a right angle to the unsuspecting farmer on his right (Fig. 15). Shahn used the hand-held Leica camera with the right-angle view finder

⁴²Ben Shahn papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

throughout his tenure with the RA/FSA.⁴³

At one point Shahn declared an exclusive commitment to photography claiming he thought he would stop painting and pursue a photographic career for the rest of his life, but in fact, this is not what transpired.⁴⁴ The exhibition of *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* attracted the attention of the Mexican muralist and social activist, Diego Rivera.⁴⁵ At the time, Rivera was looking for artists to assist him with a large mural commission that he was preparing for the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center. He asked Shahn to be one of his assistants. Shahn accepted because he not only admired Rivera's art and social conscience but also because he wanted to learn the fresco technique. Later he used the technique for his own murals commissioned for government buildings.⁴⁶

⁴³Bernarda Bryson Shahn said that she frequently stood in front of the camera so it appeared that Shahn was aiming at her while photographing the subject on his right without his or her knowledge. Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of American and Its People, 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 150.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁵Diego Rivera was so impressed with the *Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* that he agreed to write the forward for the brochure for Shahn's exhibition "The Mooney Case," at the Downtown Gallery, May 2-20, 1933. James Thrall Soby papers, Museum of Modern Art Archives, Box 36, File 18.

⁴⁶Shahn worked with success and some frustration on a number of mural projects between 1934 and 1942. In 1934 under the auspices of the New York City Public Works of Art Project he prepared eight paintings on the subject of prohibition for a mural proposed for a building in Central Park. The murals were never installed. From 1934 until 1935, he worked with

Rivera, along with Siqueiros and Orozco had been instrumental in the Mexican Mural movement, an effort to present a visual record of their own history, culture and the revolution to the illiterate Mexican people. Shahn assisted Rivera on the execution of the panoramic mural in the RCA building titled "Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future." Rivera believed it was important to include a portrait of Lenin in the mural. His patrons, the Rockefellers, objected and asked him to remove the portrait of the feared Bolshevik. Rivera refused and the mural was destroyed in 1933.

The destruction of the mural was not the last time Shahn

Lou Block on an unrealized mural project for Riker's Island. I discuss the photographs Shahn made in preparation for these murals later in this chapter. In 1937, Shahn was awarded a commission for the fresco mural at the community center in Homestead, New Jersey. It was completed in 1938, the same year Shahn and Bernarda Bryson won the competition for the mural for the Central Annex Post Office, Bronx, New York (U.S. Treasury Department, Section of Fine Arts, Public Building Administration). The Bronx murals were completed in 1939. Shahn competed for the St. Louis Post Office mural based on the Four Freedoms. He lost this competition but was given another commission for a small mural in the Jamaica, New York post office (1940). In 1940, he won the competition for the murals for the main corridor of the Federal Security Administration Building, Washington, DC (U.S. Treasury, Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration). See Charlotte M. Mayes, "Three Government Sponsored Mural Projects by Ben Shahn and Their Relationship to Documentary Photography of the 1930s," (M.A. Thesis, Hunter College, The City University of New York, 1987). The use of photography as source material for mural projects will be addressed also in Diana Linden, "The New Deal Murals of Ben Shahn: The Intersection of Jewish Identity, Social Reform and Government Patronage," forthcoming dissertation, Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York.

would be censored by patrons, nor did the experience deter his own ingrained political activism. Shahn's father Joshua Hessel Shahn, a cabinet maker by trade, was a socialist and anti-Czarist who actively protested the persecution of Jews in Lithuania (then, a province of Russia). Eventually fear of pogroms and the threat of being exiled to Siberia forced the elder Shahn to immigrate first to South Africa and then the United States. When the Shahn family arrived in America, they lived in a largely Jewish immigrant neighborhood in Brooklyn where Ben frequently heard family and friends discussing politics. In the early 1930s, Shahn was associated briefly with the John Reed Club, he illustrated some covers for *Art Front*, the publication of the New York Artists' Union, and we know he attended the Union's 1935 May Day Demonstration because he photographed it (Fig. 16).⁴⁷

It is likely that he saw the exhibition of Henri Cartier-Bresson photographs at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City in 1933. We know from later statements by Shahn that he admired Cartier-Bresson's brand of surrealist automatism and the French artist's obvious comfort with what drives the unconscious. Cartier-Bresson (1908-) "burst

⁴⁷By late 1935 Shahn's impatience with the factionalism within the organized left prompted him to sever ties with *Art Front*. Frances Pohl, *Ben Shahn, New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954* (Austin: University of Texas, 1989), p. 56. See also Francine Tyler, *Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists' Union and Its Magazine, Art Front*. Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1991.

into the world of photography with a Box Brownie." Later, he bought a three by four inches camera that was fitted with a lenscap that had to be taken off and on to make the exposure.⁴⁸ When he discovered the Leica, he felt he had "acquired an extension of his own eye."⁴⁹ The action and drama that Cartier-Bresson caught was often happenstance, but at the same time it was quite studied. The decisive moment that the photographer presses the button to release the shutter is part instinct and part cultural. Cartier-Bresson proclaimed,

Thinking should be done beforehand and afterward -- never while actually taking a photograph. Success depends on the extent of one's general culture, on one's set of values, one's clarity of mind and vivacity. The thing to be feared most is the artificially contrived, the contrary to life.⁵⁰

Acknowledging two different approaches to photography, Shahn noted,

To me there are two areas of photography. There is the thing that Paul Strand does or Walker Evans and that is with an 8 x 10 camera, getting on the thing and divulging textures and details the human eye almost can't see. Then there is the thing they say Cartier-Bresson does of people in movement, see, and those are

⁴⁸*Photographers on Photography*, Nathan Lyons, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., in collaboration with The George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, 1966), p. 41.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 41.

the two great directions for me.⁵¹

In describing Cartier-Bresson's photography, Shahn could just as easily have substituted his own name for that of the Frenchman,

Of course his photographs have form -- composition, contrast, and all that. Bresson is also a painter, so that's what you'd expect, or what you might presuppose, as I said. But the thing that makes them memorable is their content. To me, he is supremely the artist when he is looking for his subject. The rest is mechanical. The feeling for the subject and the ability to know just when to press the shutter -- that is not mechanical. To find the extraordinary aspect of the ordinary -- that's what Cartier-Bresson does.⁵²

From May of 1934 until June of 1935, Shahn made a series of photographs at various prisons and reformatories around New York State. He and Lou Block were working for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration planning murals for Riker's Island Penitentiary in New York. Shahn referred to his photographs while preparing sketches and watercolor studies for the mural proposed for a one-hundred foot long corridor in the prison (Figs. 17 and 18). He and Block worked in vain, for despite the support of August McCormick, the Commissioner of Corrections and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, the Municipal Art Commission rejected the project

⁵¹Richard K. Doud interview with Ben Shahn, April 14, 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵²"Henri Cartier-Bresson," *Magazine of Art* (May 1947), p. 189.

claiming that the murals would be "artistically, and in other respects unsatisfactory...and unsuitable for the location for which they were intended."⁵³ Shahn regretting losing the Rikers' Island commission not only because it was another aborted project but also because it was gainful employment. On the heels of this disappointment he was especially glad to hear from his friend Ernestine Evans that there was a job for him in Washington.

C. Shahn becomes a government photographer

Late in the summer of 1935, Shahn moved to Washington to work for the Roosevelt Administration. At the time his political sympathies were completely mainstream. He was a Roosevelt democrat. At no other time in his career was Shahn more aligned with the establishment; however, at no other time in the history of the Democratic party has it been more

⁵³Pohl, *Ben Shahn*, p. 15. I am also indebted to Ezra Shahn for allowing me to look at notebooks and sketches his father prepared for the unrealized murals. Additional facts concerning this incident have been garnered from the Roy Emerson Stryker papers, University of Louisville, Kentucky. See also "Mural For Prison Rejected by City," *The New York Times*, May 8, 1935, p. 27; "Prisoners' Poll Kills Mural for Riker's Island," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 9, 1935; "Panels for Prisons, Sketches Stress New Prison Policy," *The New York Times*, May 10, 1935, pp. 10, 19-20 and "Prison Art Ban is Laid to Board," *The New York Post*, May 10, 1935.

Diana Linden addressed the status of the penal system in New York State in the 1930s and Shahn's desire to convey optimistic visual messages in the proposed murals. "A Captive Audience: Ben Shahn's Murals for Riker's Island," paper presented at College Art Association, San Antonio, Texas, January 28, 1995.

influenced by the liberal Left.⁵⁴

From 1935 until 1937, Shahn was officially on the payroll in the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration where he had been hired to create art for posters and pamphlets and to paint murals. The Special Skills Division was responsible for placing works of art in Resettlement communities and coordinating cultural activities

⁵⁴Robert S. McElvaine challenges the claims of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who writing at the height of the Cold War said, "All [thirties' intellectuals including those in the Roosevelt administration] shared a profound conviction that, though Karl Marx might have been a formidable social thinker, Marxism in general ...[was] irrelevant to the United States." McElvaine argues conversely, "This assertion is mistaken. With the exception of some CIO unions, the influence of the Communist party itself was never very great in Depression America, but Marxist ideas were very important; indeed, they played a significant role in advancing the cooperative values of the period." Marxism for thirties intellectuals in America, however, was loosely defined and often refashioned at will.

According to David S. Shapiro, "the conditions of life in the 30s turned increasing numbers of artists from consideration of formal visual problems to consideration of man's place in the social order. Many artists came to interpret what they saw happening in the United States as a class struggle between capital and labor; in a word they became Marxists." The central focus of modern art shifted away from the idealization of abstraction, formal values and the last vestiges of "art for art's sake." Social realism and the documentary mode, both practiced by the polemical Shahn, were popular genres of the period. William Stott contends that the popularity of the documentary novel, film and photograph increased during the Great Depression because these media were dealing with something "real," were aligned with truth and deemed relevant to pressing social issues. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 84-87; McElvaine, p. 204; David Shapiro, ed. *Social Realism: Art as Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 11; and William Stott. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 67-73.

in these planned communities. Government sponsored art classes, concerts and community activities were designed to build morale and "relieve the strain of insecurity until economic stabilization had been accomplished."⁵⁵ Shahn said he was in complete harmony with the federal government's objectives. In an interview with Richard Doud, the artist said, "I felt very strongly about the efforts that this Resettlement Administration was trying to accomplish resettling people, helping them, and so on ... I don't think I ever felt that way before or since ... totally involved."⁵⁶

Shahn's involvement with the Historical Section of the Information Division began almost as soon as he arrived in Washington. He quickly befriended Roy Stryker and offered his opinions about what photographers to hire and the nature of their assignments. He was sitting in Stryker's office when a report for the California State Relief Administration arrived. The report was written by a California economist, Paul Schuster Taylor, and was illustrated with photographs by Dorothea Lange. Both Shahn and Stryker were impressed by Lange's direct and powerful yet sympathetic critique of social injustice. Lange was contacted and asked to join the team that already included Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein and

⁵⁵Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954*, p. 83.

⁵⁶Doud-Shahn interview, April 14, 1964.

Carl Mydans.⁵⁷

Shahn continued to advise Stryker. In the early fall of 1935, however, he left Washington and embarked upon a journey that would lead him through the coal mining region and into the deep South. Although an experienced photographer at this point, Shahn made photographs merely to aid his memory and to record details that he could use later in paintings and graphics. When Roy Stryker saw Shahn's photographs, he recognized Shahn's talent and compassion. He said,

[Shahn] was very sophisticated visually. He was a friend of Walker's. He understood Walker and got along with him, but he was an entirely different photographer from Walker, as you know from looking at the pictures. I was taken by Ben's photos because they were so compassionate ... Ben's had the juices of human beings and their troubles and all those human things.⁵⁸

Stryker convinced Shahn that his photographs could do more good if they were stored with and distributed by the Information Division. Shahn would be allowed access to them as resource material. Stryker believed Shahn would be more valuable to the Resettlement Administration as a photographer than as an illustrator. He negotiated a transfer for Shahn

⁵⁷Hurley, pp. 40-52.

⁵⁸"Just Before the War: Urban America from 1935 to 1941 as Seen by Photographers of the Farm Security Administration," exhibition catalog, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Balboa, California, September 30 - November 1, 1968 and the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, February 14 - March 30, 1969, n.p.

and a reappointment as a photographer for the Information Division. This transfer did not occur until 1938, and Shahn stayed with the FSA only through the end of August of that year. Nevertheless, between 1935 and 1938, he made thousands of the nearly 80,000 prints in the RA/FSA Collection (now stored with Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress, Washington, DC).⁵⁹

What Shahn brought to the RA/FSA photographic project were the lessons of a self-trained street photographer. When he lived in New York, he developed, printed and edited much of his own work. For the RA/FSA, he returned his film to New York or Washington for developing. He did some printing when he returned to Washington, but most of the prints were made by assistants. Stryker selected the images to be printed and punched holes in negatives he chose to kill. Shahn was very angry when he learned Stryker was destroying his work. He disagreed with Stryker's choices at times and resented not

⁵⁹Roy E. Stryker was the chief administrator for three agencies that produced photographs now kept at the Library of Congress: the Resettlement Administration (1935-37); the Farm Security Administration (1937-42); and the Office of War Information (1942-43). There are approximately 77,000 photographs in the file from the three agencies. In subsequent years, 30,000 prints from other sources have been added. There were probably originally 145,000 negatives of which 68,000 were unprinted. To my knowledge, the exact number of printed photographs by Shahn has not been calculated. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, *Documenting America: 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. vii, 337-338.

being able to get prints of some of his own work.⁶⁰

In the files at the Library of Congress, sequential images reveal that intermittently Shahn approached a subject by moving in and around his subjects, snapping the shutter in rapid succession. In a 1944 interview, Shahn described this method and his using it to document the public auction of an Ohio farm:

I looked at it almost like a movie script, except they were stills. I'd first go out and photograph all the signs on telegraph poles and trees announcing the auction, and then get the people gathering, and all kinds of details of them, and then examine the things and the auctioneer and so forth.⁶¹

Street photographers and documentarians often shoot in rapid succession and edit in the darkroom. Shahn's using a cinematic approach produced extensive narratives concerning events such as a day in the life of a coal miner or a cotton picker, a traveling medicine show or the loss of a family farm. More often he made one to three images of a targeted

⁶⁰O'Neal, p. 40.

⁶¹John D. Morse, "Ben Shahn: an Interview," *Magazine of Art* (Vol. 37, April 1944), pp. 136-137 and Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Ohio: A Photographic Portrait, 1935-1941, Farm Security Administration Photographs* (Akron: Akron Art Institute, 1980), pp. 48-49.

subject.⁶²

Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly Brannan have said that in Shahn's photographs,

The plane of focus is not always on the subject of greatest interest, shadows or objects occasionally obscure important pictorial elements, and some images have been framed in a loose or imprecise way.⁶³

In many of his photographs the visual organization is skewed, but it is an effect that whether intentional or unintentional, reflects the complexities of psychological and social relationships (Fig. 19). The averted gaze (Fig. 20)

⁶²The sequential approach was motivated by the desire to capture a great image among many and should not be confused with film technique. Shahn was interested in film as a separate medium. There are numerous references in the correspondence of Roy Stryker which refer to a film Shahn and Evans were working on in 1936. According to Bernarda Bryson, the subject of the film was to be the planned community of Columbia, Maryland. It is possible that they worked on the Ralph Steiner film *The City*. I am grateful to Beverly Brannan and Judith Keller for assistance in trying to locate film fragments by Evans and Shahn. To my knowledge, no one to date has found the film footage. Roy Stryker Papers, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville.

Norton Batkin argues there is a marked distinction between the photograph and the film still. He cites Stanley Cavell's claim that the material basis of the medium of movies is 'a succession of automatic world projections.' The film is a continuous 'act of sight.' In contrast the photograph is a fact of sight, a fact of stillness. A single frame of film may be frozen but film is not designed to be received by the viewer one still at a time. Norton Batkin, *Photography and Philosophy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 39.

⁶³Fleischhauer and Brannan, p. 77.

and de-centered figures separated by open spaces (Fig. 21) suggest the fragmentation and disenfranchisement of the individual in thirties America. Shahn's spontaneity resulted in a number of fortunate accidents. His compositions are often intriguing and appear less studied than those produced by some of his more famous colleagues.⁶⁴ His technique was not inconsistent with his claim that, "the image was more important than the quality of the image" (Fig. 22).⁶⁵

Shahn's apparently cavalier disregard for technique can also be seen as an unconscious visual analysis of situations captured by a split-second decision and bear a close affinity with the journalistic speed of execution practiced by early twentieth-century newspaper illustrators. The photographer, Edward Weston referred to artists like Shahn who worked in

⁶⁴As formulated by Roland Barthes, the *punctum* may be a detail which catch the spectator's eye by disturbing, pricking, stinging or rupturing the viewer's general enthusiasm for a picture or *studium*. The *punctum* may also be a quality that is unidentifiable or un-nameable which for personal reasons informs and elevates the viewer's response. The *punctum* is different for every viewer. I believe that because of his working method and ease with the hand-held camera, Shahn repeatedly produced photographs that incorporate the unpredictability of the medium, specifically the potential for capturing a fleeting, unreproducible chance encounters or circumstances. Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1981), pp. 26-27 and 59.

⁶⁵Davis Pratt, "Ben Shahn as Photographer," exhibition catalog, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, October 29 - December 14, 1969, p. vii.

this manner as "Ash Can" photographers.⁶⁶

Photo-reporting replaced hand-drawn illustrations once the hand-held camera, faster lenses and fine-grain film on spools were readily available. Henri Cartier-Bresson said,

We photo-reporters are people who supply information to a world in a hurry, a world weighed down with preoccupations, prone to cacophony and full of beings with a hunger for information and needing the companionship of images.⁶⁷

Attaching a right-angle viewfinder to his 35 mm. Leica camera allowed Shahn, as Sandra Phillips has noted, to "better achieve" a "sense of gritty realism...[to] document...life caught in a web of experience." In a statement that is consistent with the existing literature on Shahn's photography, Phillips continues,

Shahn's extroversion, warmth, and animated love of the particularity of all kinds of people--especially the most modest, even the narrow or small-minded--is evident in his work...his work has a roughness and spontaneous quality... a sense of immediacy. Shahn has no sense of pause or of movement distilled and made a continuum. Shahn is very much in the thick of things, sometimes taking great formal risks. He made his pictures cavalierly, and, clearly uninterested in photography as a fine art, considered his pictures notes for

⁶⁶Seldon Rodman. *Ben Shahn: Portrait of an Artist as an American* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1951), p. 90.

⁶⁷Lyons, p. 50.

paintings.⁶⁸

Stryker found he could rely on Shahn for routine and timely coverage. In contrast Evans produced extraordinary photographs but was slower and less prolific. At times Evans used a 35 mm. camera, but as a rule he preferred working with a large format, 8 x 10 inch camera that he set up so that he could carefully study the situation and wait to snap the shutter at just the perfect moment. Although deliberate and methodical as an artist, Evans was impatient with the methods and bureaucracy of government. He found expense accounts and progress reports tedious. When in the field on assignment, he frequently drifted out of contact, sometimes for six weeks at a time. On occasion, Stryker was forced to walk a tightrope between the temperamental and taciturn Evans and his own superiors who insisted that Stryker account for the whereabouts of his Senior photographer.⁶⁹

Shahn, the more casual -- at times -- almost amateurish photographer, was a more prolific photographer and a more cooperative bureaucrat. It is very likely that he assisted Stryker in outlining the specific objectives prepared for

⁶⁸Sandra S. Phillips and Maria Morris Hambourg, *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco, California: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), pp. 34-35.

⁶⁹Roy Emerson Stryker papers, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

field photographers. Before a photographer was sent into the field, he or she was prepared in the home office for what to expect. Stryker, a former college professor, provided background information on the economic conditions each was about to encounter. He asked the photographers to buy J. Russell Smith's book, *North America*. The book was a comprehensive socioeconomic geography that surveyed the means of livelihood in all the regions of the continent. For example, in it one could find a history and analysis of the southern cotton belt or coal mining in Appalachia.⁷⁰ Historical section photographers were supplied with maps, Department of Agriculture pamphlets and a script. Shahn prepared for his research trip through the South by studying about each of the various communities he planned to visit. In addition to the books suggested by Stryker, he read books by the southern sociologists Arthur Raper and Howard Odum and essays by the Southern Agrarians, a group that included historians and social scientists Herman C. Nixon and Frank L. Owsley and their literary colleagues the "Nashville Fugitives," John Crowe Ransom, Allan Tate and Robert Penn

⁷⁰The complete title of Smith's book is *North America, its people and the resources, development and prospects of the continent as agricultural, industrial and commercial area* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925). Hurley, p. 58.

Warren.⁷¹

These readings were designed to provide background information. The shooting scripts varied according to region and were not meant to specify the same frame-by-frame action for all circumstances. For example, a script Stryker gave to Arthur Rothstein in 1939 listed possible subjects as diverse as "funerals, mills, baseball games, circuses, insurance agents, medicine vendors, church festivals and the loading and unloading of fertilizer."⁷² Every RA/FSA photographer received a script for small towns, "anywhere in the USA." Stryker wanted photographs taken "on the street," of "stores, theaters, banks, hotels, garages, churches, lodges, schools, homes, etc."⁷³ Stryker corresponded with the photographers while they were in the field. His letters were more specific than the instructions provided before the field photographers left Washington. In a letter to Russell Lee Stryker wrote,

Suggestions for tenant pictures -- tenant farmers on the move from one farm to another. Try to get complete set -- loading, on road, in new home. Photographs or original copies of public sale bills of families that

⁷¹Bernarda Bryson Shahn, interview with the author, February 19, 1993.

In the late thirties, Nashville Fugitives Ransom, Tate, Warren and Cleanth Brooks formalized the "New Criticism," a new approach to the study of literature.

⁷²Roy Emerson Stryker papers, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

⁷³Ibid.

are losing the farm and having to move because of foreclosure. If possible, attend this sale and get pictures of family involved.⁷⁴

According to Bernarda Bryson Shahn, she and her husband left Washington without a prepared script. For their 1935 trip, they plotted their own route and Shahn made unilateral choices about what to photograph.⁷⁵ Artists in the Special Skills Division, where Shahn was employed, were given a "Prospectus For A Series of Resettlement Posters," which outlined the agency's objectives for content and manner of presentation. This prospectus provided general guidelines as well as lists of suggested subjects for posters. Bernarda Shahn kept an undated copy of the prospectus in her possession until 1992 when she donated some of her papers to the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The specifics of the Special Skills' prospectuses were similar to those found in Stryker's shooting scripts. Shahn may not have been issued a shooting script by Stryker. At some point similar instructions from the Special Skills Division were in his possession, and subsequent statements he made about his methods are remarkably similar to instructions

⁷⁴Letter from Roy Stryker to Russell Lee, January 30, 1937, Roy Emerson Stryker Papers, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

⁷⁵Interview with the author, February 19, 1992.

given by Stryker.⁷⁶

Shahn saw Stryker and his methods as essential to the success of achieving the humanitarian goals of the Roosevelt administration. While several of the photographers, especially Evans, considered Stryker officious, Shahn contended that "Roy was just another bureaucrat." Shahn said that he,

realized very soon that without Roy, this thing would have died. He was the one who was constantly on the hill and constantly manipulating, so on and so forth, making it possible for [the photographers] to go out in the field, to be protected completely by him for this [Shahn] was very grateful.

⁷⁶Because of the similarities between the Special Skills prospectus and Stryker's shooting scripts, it is possible Shahn had a hand in writing both, or that he followed no one's guidelines except his own, as he and Bryson-Shahn have claimed. Artists in both divisions were instructed to consider many of the subjects he photographed on his first trip. With the stated goals of resettling families and restoring viability to the land through reforestation and conservation, Special Skills artists were instructed to focus on,

Poor Soil
 Poor Housing (old log cabins, ramshackle frame
 buildings, leaky roofs, etc.
 Large families crowded into two and three rooms -
 no sanitary conveniences.
 Poor Diet - Corn and fat pork
 Tattered clothing
 Undernourished children

Ben and Bernarda Bryson Shahn Papers, File "RA Posters"
 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
 Washington, DC.

D. Ben Shahn and New Deal Ideology

Initially, the RA/FSA photographs were used to illustrate internal Resettlement Administration pamphlets as well as other government brochures (Figs. 23 and 24). In fact, a Ben Shahn photograph of a farmer was the cover illustration for the 1935 RA brochure titled "Farm Tenancy -- The Remedy, 20 Questions Asked & Answered." Within the first year of its establishment, the RA/FSA photography file became a valuable and well-known source for photographs on almost any American subject. Early in 1936, editors of one of the leading social reform periodicals of the time, *Survey Graphic*, began asking Stryker for photographs to accompany sociological articles concerning sharecropping and farm tenancy. Between March and September of 1936, *Survey Graphic* published four different sociological articles illustrated with Resettlement Administration photographs.⁷⁷ Stryker, who was eager to distribute the photographs to a wider audience, was pleased when he was approached by the popular magazines *Look* and *Life*. Publishing and exhibiting the photographs would introduce the middle class to the poor, and as a result, compassionate voters would support policies designed to relieve suffering.

The American magazine, *National Geographic*, began publication in 1888 and its articles were accompanied by

⁷⁷Hurley, pp. 122-146.

photographs as early as 1906.⁷⁸ The modern "photo magazine" was developed in Germany during the 1920s by Stefan Lorant, Erich Salomon and Felix Man. The real breakthrough in the mass circulation of photo magazines in the United States came in 1936. *Life* magazine was the first major publication to successfully incorporate the inventions of fast drying ink, a special coated paper stock and the heatset printing process to produce a magazine with high quality photographs.⁷⁹

In November of 1936, Gardner Cowles, Jr., publisher of *The Des Moines Register and Tribune* wrote to Stryker requesting photographs,

Confidentially, we are now in the process of establishing a new national picture magazine. I should much appreciate it if you would mail me a fairly large number of pictures which show the worst conditions in the south, pictures which might run under the caption 'Can such conditions possibly exist in the United States?'⁸⁰

Stryker complied and two pages of Resettlement Administration photographs of the children of sharecroppers in the South appeared in the second issue of *Look* magazine. As the demand for photographs for publication and exhibition increased,

⁷⁸Odyssey Livingston. *The Art of Photography and National Geographic* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Thomasson-Grant, 1988), p. 22.

⁷⁹Stott, p. 129.

⁸⁰Letter from Gardner Cowles, Jr., to Roy Emerson Stryker, November 23, 1936. Roy Emerson Stryker Papers.

Stryker relied more and more on those photographers who could work quickly and target specific subjects.

According to Gisele Freund, the popularity of the new journalism based almost exclusively on photos grew out of modern social conditions and the tendency toward greater standardization.⁸¹ By the early 1930s, the media, especially film and photography, were infused with a pessimism stemming from a disenchantment with war, the global economic depression, the rising rate of unemployment and social unrest. Photojournalism and photo books presented facts and elicited emotions largely from the standpoint of the middle class. As presented on the pages of glossy magazines both the lower classes and upper classes appeared to be in contrast to the norm, either to be pitied or envied. Both postures were a diversion from the reality of the times.

In 1937, on the heels of much successful magazine coverage of rural poverty, Walker Evans and James Agee were commissioned by *Fortune* magazine to prepare an extensive photo-essay. The two men lived with southern sharecroppers in Alabama in order to research an article. The article never materialized but in 1941, just as the United States was preparing for war, the culmination of their efforts appeared in book form in *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men was just one of many

⁸¹Gisele Freund. *Photography and Society* (Boston: David H. Godines, 1980), p. 149.

documentary books published during the Great Depression. Others included Erskine Caldwell's and Margaret Bourke White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* (1938), and Dorothea Lange's and Paul Schuster Taylor's *An American Exodus* (1939). Ben Shahn's photographs appeared in Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town* (1940), Richard Wright's and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1940) and Cecil Beaton's *New York* (1941).

The authors and photographers collaborating on the photo-textual documentaries were not aiming for objectivity.⁸² Juxtaposing photographs with poignant and politically expedient captions was deliberate. Their intentions were not unrelated to those of the federal government during the 1930s. Most of the arts projects sponsored by New Deal initiatives were not started to glorify America but to provide jobs for indigent artists.⁸³ The RA/FSA photographic project, however, differed from other federally funded artistic support of the time because the theoretical purpose for its existence was subtly if not overtly propagandistic.

Since the mid-1970s, critics Susan Sontag and others have declared that photographs such as those made during the

⁸²For a comparative critical analysis see John Rogers Puckett, *Five Photo-Textual Documentaries from The Great Depression* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984).

⁸³Stott, pp. 101-102.

Depression of the poor and dispossessed were less neutral than picturesque, less "real" than partisan. She avows "... no reality is exempt from appropriation, neither one that is scandalous (and should be corrected) nor one that is merely beautiful (or could be made so by the camera)."⁸⁴

Even during the 1930s, documentary rhetoric garnered some harsh criticism. When it became public knowledge that Arthur Rothstein moved a steer's skull to a strip of parched land to create a more dramatic photograph demonstrating drought conditions, the presumed truthfulness of the documentary photograph was discredited (Fig. 25). The Fargo, North Dakota daily newspaper *The Forum* ran the photograph with the headline "It's a Fake." The Erie, Pennsylvania *Dispatch-Herald* referred to the Resettlement Administration as "the principal socialist experiment of the New Deal."⁸⁵

Abigail Solomon-Godeau sees documentary photography's representation of what is real as less definitive when considered in the historical context of its production and within the cultural and linguistic systems that exist in the society in which it is received.⁸⁶ Her analysis of the

⁸⁴Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1977), pp. 63-64.

⁸⁵Hurley, pp. 88-90.

⁸⁶Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Who Is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography," *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 169-183.

liberal and humanitarian goals of documentary photography demythologizes the motivation of altruism and sharpens the focus on the appropriative aspects of the documentary mode.

Given recent perspectives on photographic truth and appropriated misery, we cannot approach Shahn's photographs outside of their content, the context of his avowed personal politics or the proclaimed agenda of the federal agency that employed him. I agree that Shahn's photographs are inflected, especially those made in the fall of 1935. He was never apolitical and his photographs often record his dim view of society's neglect; however, he did not turn his attention to the worst examples possible. I maintain that Shahn, to some degree, avoided many of the pitfalls of a distorted rhetoric because he was closely identified with the working class and because he was unwilling to valorize the poor. His photographs transcend the conventional pieties surrounding representations of the poor and marginal as victims.⁸⁷ Maurice Berger has pointed out that Shahn rarely photographed his subjects from below, a perspective "that

⁸⁷See also John Tagg, "The Currency of the Photograph: New Deal Reformism and Documentary Rhetoric," *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 153-183; Martha Rosler, "in, around and after thoughts (on documentary photograph)," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical History of Photography*, Richard Bolton, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989), pp. 303-342 and Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," *October* 52, Spring 1990, pp. 77-98.

traditionally signifies stature or esteem."⁸⁸ According to Bernarda Bryson Shahn, her husband,

"...could not tolerate the idealized figure of the 'worker' or the 'downtrodden' that in the early 1930s were becoming a distinct theme in the art world. 'It's alright,' he said, 'to have a soft heart, so long as you have a hard eye.'"⁸⁹

Shahn considered himself a "worker" who was neither superior to nor different from other workers. I acknowledge that the theoretical construction of the other is inherently hierarchical and appropriative,⁹⁰ and that photography automatically distances the creator from the subject because literally it captures that which is other than the

⁸⁸Berger maintains that many of the RA/FSA photographers, either under the direction of Stryker or by their own volition, were guilty of distorting the rhetoric of their photographs and were indifferent to a variety of timely issues including infant mortality, disease, racial and gender discrimination. Berger cites Shahn and Marion Post Wolcott as exceptions in this regard. Sally Stein also claims that Wolcott was unwilling to "mythologize the plight of the poor." Maurice Berger. *FSA: The Illiterate Eye* (New York: Hunter College of The City University of New York, 1985), n.p. and Sally Stein, *Marion Post Wolcott: FSA Photographs* (Carmel, California: The Friends of Photography, 1983).

⁸⁹"Ben Shahn: The Thirties," exhibition catalog, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1982.

⁹⁰Virginia R. Dominguez, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage Paradigm'" in *DIA Art Foundation: Discussion in Contemporary Culture No. 1*, Hal Foster, ed. (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1987), pp. 131-137.

photographer.⁹¹ Shahn's photographs could not escape these obvious features, yet I maintain his attempt to present an empathetic view of the working class and poor flows from the artist's sense of common identity.⁹²

Shahn's solidarity with the worker should not be confused with the sweeping generalizations concerning the universality of the family of man that were suggested by Edward Steichen in his 1955 exhibition with the same name.

⁹¹Susan E. Edwards, "Photography and the Representation of the Other: A Discussion Inspired by the Work of Sebastiao Salgado," *Third Text*, Summer 1991, pp. 157-172.

⁹²From 1939 until his death in 1969, Shahn lived in the New Deal planned community of Roosevelt, New Jersey (called Jersey Homesteads before Roosevelt's death). Although many artists and intellectuals settled there, it was founded as a working class community for displaced garment workers, most of whom were member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and either Russian or Eastern European Jewish immigrants.

Shahn moved there in 1939 after completing a mural for the local community center. During the Cold War, Shahn and his circle of liberal and intellectual friends in Roosevelt attracted the attention of the FBI. An FBI report on Shahn dated October 3, 1951, notes his support or participation in a number of organizations designated by the Attorney General or the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities as communist or a communist-front, on the list was the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. His file also states that his paintings had "a tendency to play up the lower class." Despite investigations and interviews with authorities throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Shahn continued to participate in various organizations dedicated to causes he supported, especially worker's rights and world peace. Given the harassment Shahn began experiencing after 1947, for his then rather moderate political affiliations and positions, it is not surprising that his own accounts from this period tend to minimize the Leftist bent and socialist overtones of his activities and sentiments during the 1930s. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954*, pp. 123-124.

Roland Barthes pointed out that the ambiguous myth of the human 'community' functions in two states. In the first, exoticism and the difference between human morphologies are asserted. "Then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced." The exhibition was organized to illustrate the universality of human actions: birth, death, work, knowledge, play. Barthes maintains that this claim of common 'nature' ordained by God aims to suppress the "determining weight of history."⁹³ John Berger has suggested that Steichen's intuition was correct, but in the context of his undertaking, the short-cuts he took treated a class-divided world as if it were a homogeneous 'family'. In Berger's opinion the exhibition as a whole was sentimental and complacent. He goes on to say that "The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory."⁹⁴

Shahn's sociological photographs cannot be seen as

⁹³Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 100-102.

⁹⁴John Berger, pp. 56-58. Also in the context of a critique of "The Family of Man," Allan Sekula argues persuasively against the assumption that photography, because it is a visual means of communication, is potentially a universal language capable of breaking down the barriers of verbal language. Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Modernism and Modernity, The Vancouver Conference Papers*, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut and David Solkin, eds., (Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), pp. 121-154.

idealized, nostalgic or in anyway unmindful of social, racial or class differentiation. Rather, by demonstrating the effects of class disparity and the inequitable distribution of wealth, they speak more critically about the failures of capitalism and democracy. On the 1935 trip, Shahn ignored aristocrats and powerful southerners in favor of the working class and poor. He said in a later interview, "My work is about people, mostly the lower one-third of the people. I try to show them with humor as well as poignancy, in any form of art, it is well to have laughter with the tears."⁹⁵

Throughout his career Shahn was straddling the fence of art and politics. He was a political artist who believed images were attached to both aesthetic and political discourses. He said that "art has always been used to propagate ideas and to persuade. It means you believe something very strongly and you want other people to believe it; you want to propagate your faith."⁹⁶

Few of Shahn's photographs can be considered universal icons of suffering. On the other hand many suggest the propagandistic agenda of the RA/FSA which belies the declared objectivity of the documentary mode. Shahn was an ardent

⁹⁵"Artist Paints for 'Causes,' Eschewing Commercial," *Newark Sunday Call*, Newark, New Jersey, January 14, 1945. Ben Shahn Papers, (Reel 135), p. 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹⁶Forrest Selvig interview with Ben Shahn, Archives of American Art, New York.

supporter of the New Deal. His travels as a government photographer reinforced his belief that government could intervene to improve the lives of ordinary people.

Reflecting upon his tenure as a RA/FSA photographer, Shahn said that during the 1930s he had been "entranced by the social dream;" however, by the end of the decade, he began to feel he could "no longer reconcile that view with the private and inner objectives of art."

... when I worked in the Resettlement Administration ... I had then crossed and recrossed many sections of the country, and had come to know well so many people of all kinds of belief and temperament, which they maintained with a transcendent indifference to their lot in life. Theories had melted before such experience. My own painting then had turned from what is called 'social realism' into a sort of personal realism.⁹⁷

For Shahn, meaning was an inalienable part of an image. He acknowledged that within altruism there are potentially selfish motives. His experiences as a government photographer moved him to examine his own intentions. Frances Pohl had noted that after the mid-1930s Shahn found theories about art and politics lacking in the human qualities that sustain people in the worst of times. Shahn believed that one way he could work to improve the lives of American workers was to place greater emphasis in his paintings on the private moments of individuals rather than their public struggles. He had learned that it was the

⁹⁷Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, p. 40.

beliefs and temperaments of strong individuals and not political theory that had allowed them to survive the Depression.⁹⁸

Between 1935 and 1938, Shahn fully embraced the task of raising the level of social and political consciousness of the American people. During the Great Depression, the standard of living dropped precipitously, all over the world. In the American South, it was even lower than the national average. Local support efforts had been ineffectual. The region needed both immediate relief and long-range economic reform. New Deal administrators recognized the power of the photographic message, and they effectively harnessed that power for political and what they ardently believed were humanitarian goals.⁹⁹ Ben Shahn came to Washington with fully developed aesthetic standards and a desire to participate in the New Deal initiatives.

⁹⁸Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954*, pp. 55-56.

⁹⁹Surveys of the RA/FSA photographic file indicate that approximately a quarter of all the photographs made between 1935 and 1943 were of the deep south (North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas). Fleischhauer and Brannan, p. 336.

CHAPTER TWO

Miners and Mountaineers

*Come all you poor workers, good news to you I'll tell
How the good ole union is come in here to dwell.
Which side are you on, Which side are you on?*

*If you go to Harlan County, there is no neutral there.
You'll either be a union man or a thug for D. H. Blair.
Which side are you on, Which side are you on?*

Florence Reece
Harlan, Kentucky, 1930

During the first world war, coal production in the United States rose to meet the increased demand of the war-time economy; however, after 1919 the industry resisted streamlining operations for efficiency. Over development, poor management, a lack of planning and organization caused the industry to fall into a recession and to reach high levels of unemployment in the decade before the Great Depression. Shrinking markets and competition from oil, natural gas and hydro-electric power devastated the coal industry. When production costs exceeded market value, net losses were not absorbed by management but passed down to labor. Companies routinely cheated on weighing miners' loads. Beginning in the 1920s, there were bloody confrontations as workers fought to unionize the mines. The struggle continued well into the next decade. In the summer

of 1935, West Virginia coal miners called for another strike.¹

Ben Shahn learned of the union strikes, and thinking that he could get some interesting ideas there for future paintings and drawings, he and Bernarda Bryson, who later became his second wife, decided to take a trip to the South. Shahn and Bryson meandered through the winding roads in the mining country from Scott's Run, Morgantown, Purselove and Omar, West Virginia, to Jenkins, Kentucky, and to the deserted mining town of Zinc, Arkansas. Talking to the local inhabitants, Shahn learned of the instability of a miner's life. Most of the mining families lived in company houses and traded at company owned stores. Their wages barely covered expenses, locking them into a cycle of dependency with their employers. Working in the mines was arduous and dangerous. The photographs that Ben Shahn made in these coal mining communities cast a critical eye on the disparity between the "haves" and the "have nots."

In this chapter, I concentrate on the photographs that Shahn made in the mountain regions of West Virginia, Kentucky and Arkansas. I discuss how his politics informed his response to the working conditions of coal miners and how

¹A synopsis of an address presented by Dr. Alexander Sachs, Director of the Division of Research and Planning on the National Recovery Administration at the Washington hearing on the Code for the Coal Industry appears in "A Report on Coal," *The New Republic* (August 30, 1933). See also Sterling D. Spero, "Trouble in Coal," *The New Republic* (July 3, 1935), pp. 217-220.

that industry, in particular, and capitalism in general effected the day-to-day lives of mountain people including their children.

A. Appalachia

Before industrialization, independent minded southern mountaineers from Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee lived semi-reclusive lives, barely surviving on small family farms. Neither the terrain nor the climate was conducive to the profitable cultivation of the traditional southern cash crops of cotton, tobacco, sugar cane, or rice. The mountain region, once the American frontier, verdant and unspoiled, was settled by Anglo-Saxon immigrants, mostly from Scotland, Ireland and England. In the nineteenth century, timber companies moved in and stripped the hillsides of their lush forests. Soon thereafter, the discovery of rich coal deposits attracted industrialists and mining entrepreneurs. Poor, uneducated mountaineers sold their land and mineral rights to outsiders. Their small profits were soon spent, and without any other means of support they were easily lured into the coal mines and into a life style bordering on peonage.²

²Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life Since 1900* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) and Allen Batteau with Phillip Obermiller "The Transformation of Dependency," in *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence*, Allen Batteau, ed. (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1983), pp. 1-13.

In 1934, Shahn had supported the Artists Union and as a "union" man himself expected the West Virginia coal miners would consider him a comrade. He marveled at their lack of solidarity. He later told a story of an encounter in West Virginia,

When I was in West Virginia during a little coal strike there and I went down to the mine pit and pickets were there. I thought the easiest way to open conversation with anybody was to offer them a cigarette, you know. And I carefully bought a pack of union-made cigarettes, Raleighs and I offered them one and they said, 'Nah, I don't smoke them.' and I said, 'Well, those are union cigarettes.' and he said, 'Look boy, I've been in the union for thirty years; here.' and he offered me one of the more popular brands, you see. I found if you said a bad word about Lewis [John L. Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers] you might have been lynched. If you were caught with a copy of *The Nation* you would have been lynched too, almost, you see. Those contradictions became gray all over, they had been so beautifully black and white to me.³

Shahn learned that regardless of their deplorable working and living conditions, miners frequently were ambivalent about the union. Being unionized gave the miners leverage for collective bargaining, but in reality their day-to-day existence had changed only marginally.

³Transcript of "A Profile of Ben Shahn," made for NBC-TV program "The Open Mind," moderator Eric F. Goldman, aired January 17, 1973. James Thrall Soby papers, Box 35 Folder (1) Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Another version of this story is related in an interview with Shahn and Richard Doud, April 14, 1964. Archives of American Art. In the Doud interview, Shahn is less dramatic, does not quote the miner referring to him as "boy" and does not use the term "lynching."

In 1933, the United Mine workers organized slow downs on a national scale. With the support of Roosevelt, the National Recovery Administration was able to push through the Bituminous Coal Code of 1933.⁴ The Code established a coal commission to govern minimum prices, trade practices, hours and wages; but in 1935, the Bituminous Coal Code seemed destined to be overturned and its accomplishments abolished.⁵ Union members worked with Senator Joseph F. Guffey (D-Pennsylvania) to introduce the coal stabilization bill. The bill declared coal a public utility, subject to federal regulations by a government commission. It set up a code with price-fixing machinery and provisions for allocating and controlling production. It proposed to close marginally efficient mines, putting them in a "national coal reserve." Compensation to released miners was to be paid by a bond issue carried by a coal tax. The Guffey Coal Stabilization bill also guaranteed the right to collective bargaining. In August of 1935, the Guffey bill was passed in both houses of

⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, Company, 1956), p. 118.

⁵Quoting from the *Harvard Law Review* Schlesinger writes, "At no time in the country's history was there a more voluminous outpouring of judicial ruling in restraint of acts of Congress than the body of decisions in which the lower courts, in varying degree, invalidated every measure deemed appropriate by Congress for grappling with the great depression," Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 447.

Congress, and for the next two years most union members were afforded some protection. The coal industry, however, was made up of not only the organized larger concerns such as the Rockefeller and Mellon enterprises but also of small local companies; and very often the employees in the small companies, union or non-union, were slow to see stabilization.⁶

During mine strikes, local authorities were called in to keep order. In Morgantown, West Virginia, Shahn made photographs of a local deputy sheriff with his back to the camera lens. The deputy leans forward on a mailbox (Fig. 26). This stance throws his hips, buttocks and holstered gun forward into the center of the picture plane. In the first version, a medium shot, Shahn included the ambient street scene featuring a distant grocery, passing automobiles and another pedestrian, but it is the deputy's buttocks and gun that dominate the image. Cast on the side of the mailbox is the photographer's own shadow, an indexical sign of his presence in Morgantown that day in 1935. The shadow of his head, neck and upper torso indicate that Shahn was standing at a right angle to the deputy (a position consistent with our knowledge of his using a right-angle attachment). Another photograph, a close-up, one in the artist's

⁶Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, p. 336. See also James D. Watkinson, "An Exercise in Futility: The Guffey Coal Act of 1935," *Pennsylvania History*, Vol. 54, no. 2 (1987), pp. 103-114.

possession at the time of his death, clarifies Shahn's intention (Fig. 27). In the second version, the deputy has not moved, but the shadow is higher on the mailbox indicating that Shahn stepped closer to his subject and quickly snapped the shutter a second time before the deputy moved. The focus on the holster and gun is tighter, a purview that stresses the signifiers of authority, legal enforcement, perhaps, even violent suppression of striking union men.

Without the support of collective bargaining power non-union miners had less recourse for protesting injustices. The air inside the mines was heavy with coal dust, passageways were dark, narrow and low. Mine owners did not want to spend the money it would cost to keep the coal dust along the passageways damp enough to prevent spontaneous explosions. Miners received no wages for what was called "dead work"--chores essential for mining but not coal producing such as timbering the mine roof, cutting slate, or preparing the mine for the excavation of ore.⁷

Wages were nominal and financial security was unobtainable. In Purseglove on Scott's Run, West Virginia, Shahn took a photograph at close range of an African-American miner caught in the cycle of company dependence (Fig. 28). The lines on the man's face are deep, curving under his eyes and around his mouth like engraved cursive script. According

⁷Spero, p. 217.

to a note written on the Library of Congress file photograph, the miner has just received a paycheck for two-weeks work that totaled \$25.77, but the company had deducted \$23.77 for housing, food and other expenses, leaving the miner only \$2.00 to support himself and his family until his next paycheck.⁸ In Calumet, West Virginia, Shahn photographed a Hungarian miner and his barefoot wife standing on their porch surrounded by their humble possessions: they face frontally, expressionless (Fig. 29). Although exact dating of the photograph is not possible, it was made between the first of September and the end of October, 1935. The man was 63 years old, had worked in a coal mine for 34 years but was currently out of work and had no company pension.⁹ At this time social security was still in its formative stage.¹⁰

Employed workers anxiously queued to receive meager compensation. In one of Shahn's photographs workers from the Purseglove Mine file for paychecks one behind the other, at ground level, ascending the stairs and on to the next

⁸Debts noted on the RA/FSA file photograph were "Company store \$10.94, Company house \$4.50, insurance \$1.00, sickfund 45 cents, lamp 75 cents, check weighman 52 cents, another item 61 cents and 'advance' \$5.00."

⁹Notes appear on the Library of Congress file copy of the photograph, Washington, DC.

¹⁰For a discussion of the Social Security Act of 1935 see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), pp. 301-312.

landing, aimed at a destination outside of the picture plane (Fig. 30). During the Great Depression, the fortunate waited in line for paychecks or relief checks, others waited in bread lines, unemployment lines or in employment lines hoping to apply for the occasional opening. Writing about the 1930s, Benjamin Appel declared, "The decade was a beating heart echoing the shuffling feet of the picket lines; and the thunderous rhythm of the booted regiments."¹¹

¹¹Benjamin Appel, "Remembering the 1930's" in *Myth, Creativity, Psychoanalysis*, Maynard Solomon, ed., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), p. 151. Excerpted from *The Literary Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Fall 1973).

Economic recessions and depressions have occurred throughout modern history, and many world leaders including Herbert Hoover felt that the best tactic was to allow the natural economic cycle to play itself out. Other leaders and economists insisted that when business does not supply sufficient capital for economic recovery, governments should intervene. Massive government spending would stimulate the economy and reverse the downward trend. Germany, Italy and Japan revived their depressed economies through military spending. When Roosevelt was elected in 1932, he held many of the same beliefs that Hoover practiced, but the country had elected him on the faith that he would actively address the nation's economic state. Although Roosevelt was not an economist, he surrounded himself with intellectuals and sophisticated advisors, the "Brain Trust," who convinced him that federal spending would provide both immediate relief and stimulate long-term economic recovery. New Deal programs created jobs and put additional currency into circulation. Nevertheless, economic indicators did not return to pre-1929 levels until 1943, two years after the United States entered World War II. Sadly and ironically, in America just as in Germany and Italy, it was the "thunderous rhythm of booted regiments" that finally stifled the sound of the poor's shuffling feet. Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, p. 228; Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, pp. 400-401; and Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression America, 1929-1941* (New York: Time Books, 1993), pp. 327-328, 330, 346. For a general discussion of supply-side economics see William Trufant Foster and Waddill Catchings, *The Road to Plenty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928) and John Maynard Keynes, *The*

In a photograph Shahn made in Freeze Fork, West Virginia, a lone miner, walks along a railroad track at the crest of a mining community (Fig. 31). Rows of identical company houses with outhouses line the dale below. A tree conspicuously isolated in the foreground punctuates the denuded craggy landscape, a reminder of the once verdant hillsides. From a bird's-eye view, the coal miner is anonymous and diminished in stature. The distant shot encompasses all that surrounds the individual suggesting that the coal miner is subsumed by the industry. The photograph's message, consistent with Shahn's personal convictions and grounded in his study of the writings of Saint-Simon and Karl Marx, is that the human cost of industrialization is the degradation and alienation of the individual, and that as capital is accumulated, the lot of the laborer worsens.¹²

Shahn photographed a group men of sitting on the railroad tracks just outside of the local movie house in Omar, West Virginia (Fig. 32). The tracks run from left to right and slightly diagonally across the lower section of the photograph. They lead somewhere but the men sitting on them are going nowhere. Coal from the Appalachian hills and mountains was transported by rail to the rest of the world,

General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money ((New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936).

¹²Author, interview with Bernarda Bryson Shahn, February 19, 1993.

but few natives left the land of their ancestors. A group of boys congregate on the stairs leading to the "Omar Theatre," where admission was 10 cents. Film stills, photographs within the photograph, advertize the movie "Hard Rock Harrigan," with George O'Brien, a popular cowboy star of the time.

During the Depression, when spending money was at its greatest premium ever, unprecedented numbers of people attended motion pictures. The historian Robert S. McElvaine argues persuasively that the movies offered not only escape but also validation of the values of ordinary people. Gangster films of the early 1930s such as *Little Caesar* (1930) demonstrated the ultimate futility of unabated selfishness, and later "screwball" comedies like *It Happened One Night* (1934) ridiculed the wayward values of the idle rich but without attacking specific characters, a technique that allowed an heiress and a down-and-out newspaper reporter to overcome class barriers and "fall in love." The films of Frank Capra and John Ford repeatedly championed middle-class and working-class values. Indeed, Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) is the saga of a Welsh coal mining family who endure with dignity a series of tragedies including the struggle for unionization and the deaths of the patriarch and

eldest son.¹⁴

Death and darkness hover over the lives of coal miners like the black dust the settles on everything. Miners and their families face the possibility of sudden death from an explosion or a cave-in as well as the certainty of a slow death from black lung disease.¹⁵ The challenges of a hard life are seen on the thin, drawn face of a miner employed by The Consolidated Coal Company in Jenkins, Kentucky (Fig. 33). Under his fingernails is that trace of coal dust that never washes away, the ominous presence of industrial exploitation.

This photograph was one in a series of photographs that in the context of one another combine cinematically to tell frame-by-frame the story of a day in the life of a miner (Figs. 33-36). Presenting these photographs collectively,

¹⁴McElvaine, pp. 208-221. See also Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971, reprinted Harper & Row, 1971); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975); Roger Dooley, *From Scarface to Scarlett: American Films of the 1930s* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979); and Peter Stead, *Film and the working class: The feature film in British and American Society* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁵Black lung disease or pneumoconiosis is a disease which affects coal workers and occurs through prolonged exposure and inhalation of coal dust. There are two types, simple and complicated. Simple pneumoconiosis is categorized from one to three by severity with number three representing the highest degree of accumulation. Complicated pneumoconiosis is accompanied by shortness of breath and the growth of fibrous tissues but is contracted by less than 4% of all mine workers. W. Keith C. Morgan, *Occupational Lung Diseases* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: W.R. Saunders, 1984).

enhances the narrative capacity for each individual photograph. Shahn's timing and selections allowed him to capture for himself and eventually to convey to others a first-hand view of what he saw in eastern Kentucky and what he came to understand about the quality of the lives of these coal miners.

Early in the morning miners gather to wait for the bus that will take them to the pit. The miners look forlorn in all of the photographs. In one photograph a group of men congregate outside of the bus (Fig. 35). The figure on the far left is the foreman. His clothing and the absence of a pit helmet signify his position as different from and of a station higher than that of the laborers. His left hand dangles from the post he leans on. It is metaphorically the limp hand of management, an ineffectual hand that does not perform manual labor. Each day the miners carry lunch pails to the coal pit. They will not be coming home in the middle of the day for a meal. After boarding the bus (Fig. 36), they ride to the pit and descend to work. Throughout the day coal is loaded into freight cars, carried out of the mines (Fig. 37), and eventually, out of Jenkins, Kentucky.

At the end of the day, miners returned to their families and homes (Fig. 38). Housing was provided by the company, but the mining shacks were as dreary as the mine itself. Miners were paid in company scrip, tender redeemable at the company store, but very little was ever left over for home

improvements after all expenses and advances had been deducted by the company.

When Shahn arrived in Zinc, Arkansas, the mines had closed. With no work available, the town was nearly deserted. Only a few inhabitants and an occasional sign of past vitality remained (Fig. 39). In the depths of the Depression for miners with limited and specific skills, there were few options.

Shahn was deeply moved by the harshness and hazards that coal miners endured day to day. His memories and the photographs he made in Appalachia stayed with him and appeared in his art throughout the 1940s. Responding to Shahn's prints of dilapidated, soot covered mine buildings Kenneth Prescott remarked that, "the dismal and sick beauty that accrues to those dark sooty mine buildings that had once been painted...take on strange efflorescences."¹⁶ In March of 1947, one hundred and eleven men were killed when they were trapped 540 feet underground in a mine explosion at the Bell & Zoller Coal Mine in Centralia, Illinois. A year later, John Bartlow Martin wrote about the disaster and asked Shahn to illustrate his article. Shahn made one hundred drawings, twenty-four appeared with the article.¹⁷ In the

¹⁶Kenneth Prescott, *The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., and the Estate of Ben Shahn, 1973), p. 23.

¹⁷John Bartlow Martin, "The Blast in Centralia, No. 5," *Harper's Magazine* (March 1948), pp. 193-220.

paintings, *Miners' Wives*, 1948 (Fig. 40), *Mine Disaster*, 1948 and *Death of a Miner*, 1949 (Fig. 41), Shahn relays the sorrows he first encountered more than a decade earlier.

The cycles of economic boom and depression were of little consequence to coal miners and their families, for in a nation where most people dream of a better life, these people have been poor generation after generation. In 1965, Shahn went back to the coal mining region of Appalachia only to see "tragically enough, it had not changed."¹⁸

B. The Ozarks

When Bryson and Shahn arrived in Arkansas, they were greeted by Senator Joseph Robinson (D-Arkansas). Robinson, the Senate Majority leader and a staunch supporter of

¹⁸Transcript of "A Profile of Ben Shahn," Eric F. Goldman, moderator, January 17, 1973. James Thrall Soby papers, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

The hard lives and poor standard of living that exists in Appalachia has attracted the attention of photographers before and after Shahn. In the early 1930s, Doris Ulmann began a series of annual trips to photograph the mountain people of eastern Kentucky. In 1934, Lewis Hine prepared a photographic expose for *Survey Graphic*. Walker Evans travelled through West Virginia making photographs in 1935, and in 1936 Roy Stryker sent an undated letter to Evans saying, "It might pay you to drift back to West Virginia and try to do some of the things with the 8 by 10 that Ben Shahn caught with his Leica." And in 1937, Arthur Rothstein covered the coal mining region for the FSA, and in 1940 Marion Post Wolcott photographed in eastern Kentucky. More recently Shelby Lee Adams, Wendy Ewald and Susan Lipper have photographed the insular communities of southern Appalachia. Letter to Evans is located in the Roy E. Stryker Papers, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

Roosevelt, had been instrumental in helping pass important New Deal Legislation.¹⁹ Robinson was overtly solicitous of powerful planters and landlords and had sided against the tenant farmers and sharecroppers during the recent farm labor dispute. He generously escorted Shahn and Bryson around for several days, but they preferred exploring Arkansas on their own.²⁰ They parted company from the Senator and drove to a farming community in Boone County in the Ozark Mountains,

In Boone County Shahn visited Rehabilitation Clients. Commenting on the impoverished farm land and poor housing, he noted that one family, the Mulhalls, had been resettled on "submarginal land. It was almost solid rock. There were no windows in their home, a dirt floor and no water."²¹

In a photograph of two rehabilitation clients a man and woman face frontally as if knowingly posing for a portrait (Fig. 42). In this case, Shahn must have disclosed to his subjects how the right-angle attachment worked. They stand in front of their humble log house, centered horizontally in

¹⁹Roosevelt referred to Robinson as his friend and associate during a speech delivered in Little Rock, Arkansas on June 10, 1936. For the preceding year, Roosevelt had been encouraging his staff to work toward more equitable distribution of farm subsidies to tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

²⁰Doud-Shahn interview, April 14, 1964.

²¹Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and Its People, 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 33.

the picture frame. A lantern hangs on the side of the house above the woman's head, and a piece of cloth hangs by the window. The man and woman both look into the camera lens with almost no expression. Their arms fall straight along the sides of their respective bodies. Roy Stryker noted on the verso side of his personal copy of this print, "Amer. Gothic."²²

Shahn was frequently able to catch pensive, private moments. One of his photographs of a destitute woman, another rehabilitation client, was made famous when it toured internationally with the exhibition, "The Family of Man" (Fig. 6). In another photograph of the same dejected, frail woman, she is standing outside of her log house, framed by the doorway. She holds her head in her left hand, a gesture of exasperation (Fig. 43).

The loss of hope is eloquently expressed by a dropped head and slumped shoulders of Sam Nichols, an Arkansas tenant farmer from the Ozark mountain area (Fig. 44).²³ Nichols is also photographed in front of his home. He lived in this

²²The print, now in the Collection the Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, was acquired in 1976. The complete verso inscription reads, "Rehabilitation Clients, Boone County, Ark., Oct. 1935/6034-M2/Amer. Gothic/Roll A-17/dupe/R. Stryker/OA20194/IT"

²³For a discussion of how the presence of power and its opposite are exerted on individuals and revealed in their bodies see Michel Foucault, "The body of the condemned" in *The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 3-30.

dilapidated structure with his wife and children (Fig. 45). The building is in such a shameful state of disrepair, it appears unfit for habitation. As the Depression lingered on year after year, the possibility of breaking the cycle of poverty became increasingly remote. Discretionary income was non-existent. Replacing broken floor boards on a front porch and other non-essentials would have to wait. Nichols, like so many others, had to endure.

Photographs that Shahn made of pedestrian objects such as the stove of a destitute family (Fig. 46) or the plates on another family's kitchen table (Fig. 47) are more than "objective" documents. "Some documents inform the intellect, some the emotions," wrote William Stott.²⁴ Shahn understood how photographs of objects could be structured to provoke emotional responses. Discussing the choice of whether or not to use a flash, Shahn also revealed a secondary motivation.

When some of the people came in and began to use flash I thought it was immoral. I'll give you a reason why. You know, you come into a sharecropper's cabin and it's dark. But a flash destroyed that darkness. It is true that a flash would actually illuminate the comic papers that they used to paste on the their walls, but this wasn't the impact it had on me. It was the darkness, the glistening of the eyes, the glistening of a brass ornament on top of a big bed, you know, a glass, a mirror that would catch light. I wanted very much to hold on to this, you see. Now, that's a matter of personal judgment about this thing whether you divulge everything or whether things are kept mysterious as they

²⁴William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 18.

are viewed.²⁵

The pots and plates of these poor Depression era mountaineers were photographed with whatever natural light was available. Their humble quality signifies the class of the owners. Granted, over time, many of these objects have taken on status for being hand-made relics, kept and preserved as the crafts or decorative arts of the period. In their own time, photographs of these objects, like the RA/FSA photographs in general, served as reminders to the middle and upper classes that they were better off than the one third of the nation that Roosevelt claimed in 1936 who were still "ill-housed, ill-clothed and ill-fed."²⁶

C. Mountain children

If a photographer's objective is to manipulate the emotions of an audience, then there is probably no more effective means than with the image of a child. Cartier-Bresson was attracted to children as subjects because they possessed a freer spirit, one closer to the unconscious, unobstructed by socialization and repressed desires.²⁷ The

²⁵Doud-Shahn interview, April 14, 1964.

²⁶Franklin Delano Roosevelt inaugural address, March 6, 1936.

²⁷Sandra S. Phillips and Maria Morris Hambourg. *Helen Levitt* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), p. 30.

French photographer was indebted to the Surrealists' appreciation for automatism and their fascination with spontaneity and found objects. He marveled at these same qualities in children. In a similar vein, the spontaneity and frankness of children appealed to photographers Helen Levitt, Shahn and others.

During the 1930s, children were becoming the subject of more focused attention, both in popular culture and among scholars. Bruno Bettelheim, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Karen Horney were formulating their theories on the separate psychological identity of children.²⁸ Their innovations and the complexities of their thinking did not flow into the mainstream of American consciousness immediately. Nevertheless, the perceived or projected innocence of children appealed to world-weary adults and was manifested in the immense popularity of Shirley Temple and the Little Rascals. The kidnapping and murder of the Lindbergh baby heightened the protective instinct and feelings of helplessness in the face of tragedy.

During the Depression, many adults suffered from oppressive guilt because of their inability to find work and to provide adequately for their families. Some experts believe this guilt was one of the most psychologically damaging effects of the Depression; on the other hand, many

²⁸Ibid., pp. 30-31.

children of the Depression escaped these feelings of guilt or shame because, even though countless children worked outside of the home, society did not expect them to be responsible for the financial well being of the family. Children who did work began working earlier than they would have under normal circumstances. Although this deprived them of years of innocence, it instilled in their generation a strong work ethic.²⁹

Having faced political exile from Russia at a young age and having entered the printing profession while still in his early teens, Shahn, too, had confronted the adult world early in life. Nevertheless, the innocence and vulnerability of children never ceased to stir him.³⁰ When Roy Stryker and

²⁹McElvaine, pp. 84-185 and Glen H. Elder, *Children of the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), McElvaine's position seems to rely strongly on the conclusions of Elder whose research was concentrated in Oakland, California. There are, in my opinion, two major weaknesses to Elder's study. I consider one geographic region too narrow to be representative of the whole nation especially given the social realities and variations in economic deprivation throughout the country. Secondly, his study affirms the position that acquisitive individualism is indicative of constructive adaptive behavior, disregarding its potential for psychological distancing.

³⁰Long after he ceased making photographs, Shahn maintained a source file labeled "children." It held newspaper clippings, his own photographs and photographs by other photographers. Shahn's contemporaries remarked on his sensitivity to children. James Thrall Soby, the Museum of Modern Art curator for the 1947 Shahn retrospective, wrote in a letter to Francie Fletcher that the artist "adored his own and other children and he always talked to them as his equals." Kenneth Prescott, author of several books on Shahn's work, said that Shahn's drawings, paintings, and prints reflect "a wide variety of social and philosophical concerns"

Shahn were discussing the potential power of a photograph of eroded soil to effect people, Stryker expressed his pleasure and Shahn responded, "Look Roy, you're not going to move anybody with this eroded soil -- but the effect this eroded soil has on a kid who looks starved, this is going to move people. You just can't move anybody with this kind of photograph."³¹

Stryker and Shahn were both aware of Lewis Hines' photographs of children working in fields and factories and how persuasive and useful his photographs had been in the struggle to reform child-labor laws. They agreed that children could be effective in convincing the public and Congress to support relief and recovery initiatives.

among which were "man's relations with the world around him; the heights of his understanding of the divine; the depths of his despair; *the vulnerability of little children*; and the evils of war"(my italics). To put too much emphasis in these accounts of Shahn's compassion for children would be imprudent. Only one year before Shahn's photographic journey through the South, he abandoned his first wife, Tillie, and his own two small children, a decision which surely must have caused him considerable anxiety and guilt. Shahn's source files are located with the Bernarda Bryson Shahn papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. The undated letter to Miss Francie Fletcher from James Thrall Soby is in the Ben Shahn papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Prescott quote appears in *The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn*, p. xvii.

³¹Doud-Shahn interview, April 14, 1964; reprinted in F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (New York: DaCapo Books, 1972), p. 50

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In Appalachia, many male children went into the coal mines as soon as their parents would allow them to go (legally or illegally depending on the mine operators). Hine had made photographs of juveniles working in the coal mines as part of his crusade for child-labor reform. Despite his remark to Stryker concerning the effectiveness of a child model, Shahn seemed drawn more often to the prosaic aspects of children's lives. Younger boys and girls helped around the house and ran errands for their mothers (Fig. 48). Shahn made a photograph of three mountain children headed into the local village for relief food. The long shot demonstrates Shahn's standard practice of illustrating events with people. The lively gait of the children contradicts the bleak landscape and monotony of the identical houses on the ridge. Their presence contributes to the narrative potential, and yet the rear view deters sentimentality, illustrating Shahn's tendency to skirt the worst conditions.

In a photograph of three boys rummaging through old tires, wagon wheels and debris, Shahn shows how children find pleasure in the world around them (Fig. 49). The central figure is barefoot and momentarily distracted. The other two boys remain intent on their mission. Child's play, such as a puppet show, was all the more enjoyable because of its rarity and, like film, valued for its potential as an escape mechanism (Fig. 50). With puppets or with any toys, children essentially construct a microcosm of the adult world but one

in which they are empowered.³²

In the Ozark Mountain area of Arkansas Shahn photographed children and their tattered toys (Figs. 51 and 52). He said, "I saw a family and they were so miserable that it was unbelievable. The child was holding some ragged doll and the child looked as horribly ragged as the doll. It was an unbelievable situation."³³

In one of these photographs, two young children stand off center to the right of the picture frame (Fig. 52). One child, a little boy dressed in patched overalls, holds two kittens protectively close to his chest. The top of his head is cropped out of the picture, but the lower portion of his face bears the same forlorn expression as the little girl's who stands next to him. Her doll's face literally is decomposing from neglect: its eyes -- frozen, eerie, detached and in sharp contrast to the curiosity of the squirming kittens -- signify the injurious and numbing effects of society's indifference. The poignancy of this photograph is intensified when juxtaposed with a comparable image Shahn made three years later Mechanicsburg, Ohio (Fig. 53). In the later photograph, the daughters of Virgil Thaxton hold their dolls with similar affection and attachment. The Thaxton children are well groomed and their

³²Roland Barthes, "Toys," in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 53-55.

³³Doud-Shahn interview, April 14, 1964.

dolls are in good condition. The girls' clothing, the setting -- the well-maintained porch, windows with lace window curtains -- denote middle class values as well as middle class opportunities unavailable to the Arkansas children.

Because Shahn was so resistant to using a flash, most of his photographs were made outdoors. The front porch was the scene of much activity, especially for families with no electricity. Shahn photographed two dirty, barefoot boys sitting on their stoop (Fig. 54). In another photograph a young boy leans against a door jam, sucking his thumb (Fig. 55). A blond boy in overalls stands in a doorway staring at something we cannot see. His mother and another sibling are behind him (Fig. 56). His distant gaze implies reflection, but we cannot know what occupied his thoughts so long ago. The children in these photographs are not pathetic. Shahn does not focus on their suffering but rather on pedestrian views of prosaic and unremarkable moments in their lives.

By 1930, the birth rate in the United States had dropped to its lowest level in the twentieth century, and although children continued to have broad emotional appeal, many people criticized the poor for having so many children when it was obvious that they had no way to support them.³⁴ A New

³⁴The birth rate remained below its 1930 level until the United States entered World War II. *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the "Forgotten Man,"* Robert S. McElvaine, ed. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University

Deal poster entitled "Population Increase," (Fig. 24) shows happy, healthy children living and playing in the warmth and security of their homes and families. Superimposed on the poster is a chart indicating the ratio of the total number of children in the southeast to the number of children in the subregion. This chart was designed to dispell the notion that the poor in the subregions of the southeast were reproducing disproportionately to the general population.

While some children of the Depression escaped what Glen Eder refers to as the most ominous guilt of the era, that is the guilt of being financially responsible for the family's suffering, many others were subject to feelings of alienation and fears of abandonment brought on by living in a financially unstable environment.

Shahn's photograph of the Twilligers portrays four members of the family -- mother, father and two children -- piled into their car (Fig. 57). Shahn and Bryson were virtually living out of their Model A Ford at this time; however, for the Ozark family, the car does not signify mobility but the entrapment of limited options. The image is cropped just below the window ledge of the open car. The parents and infant occupy the front seat, and a young son is

of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 115. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), Series A-119-134, B-1-10, vol. 1, 15, 49.

in the back. Their clothes are ragged. The boy's shirt is held together with a safety pin (Fig. 58). Not present in this photograph was their 15 year-old daughter. In a conversation with her Shahn learned she had never been to school because the only school was too far away.³⁵ In the photograph the Twilligers appear unposed, unaware. Much of the instability that characterized the lives of countless mountaineers during the 1930s can be read on their faces. Uncertainty triggered by drought, chronic unemployment and bank closures prompted people with limited skills and no assets to look for work and a future elsewhere.

Caravans of farm workers moved West and South in search of work. John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), is a dramatization of the plight of the displaced Joad family. Steinbeck cites the RA/FSA photographs as at least part of his inspiration for writing the book. Like the Joad family many of the people featured in the RA/FSA photographs discovered that promises of work were frequently rumors; and if some jobs were available, the number of applicants far exceeded the number of openings. Unemployed migrants lived in camps until public officials forced them out again. Instead of finding security, many migrants became caught in a cycle of migration, moving from one short-term solution to another.

³⁵O'Neal, p. 34.

A later account of an Arkansas mother's experiences is a telling example of the trials of the migratory life style.

My husband and me, we tried to stay there in Arkansas and work on [the bossman's] place...we couldn't because he said we were to stay if we liked, but he couldn't pay us nothing from now on... we tried Little Rock, and there wasn't a job you could find, and people said go North, but my sister went to Chicago and died there, a year after she came. So, we decided we'd just stay away from there, the city, and then the man came through, from one of the big farms down here, and he said we could make money, big money, if we just went along with him and went down to Florida and worked on the crops...And with the kids, one after the other, and with needing to have someplace to stay and some food and money, we've been moving along ever since.

So, we keep going, yes sir, we do. I try to keep everyone in good shape, the best I can. I tell them that it'll be nice, where we're going to, and there will be a lot to see on the road, and there's no telling what kind of harvest there will be, but we might make a lot of money if there's a real good one. I don't believe I should hold out those promises, though--because they believe you, the kids. I know that now, and it just makes them good, happy children, moving along with you, and helping you with the crops.³⁶

Robert Coles, the physician and sociologist who recorded this story, maintains that although the children of migrants appear to be congenial and close to one another, they are often too quiet, much too withdrawn from the world.³⁷

Southern miners and mountaineers were born of a pioneering tradition. Many were impoverished by capitalism's

³⁶Robert Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers: Children of Crisis*, Volume II (Boston, Massachusetts and Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 59.

³⁷Ibid, p. 54.

neglect. Without federal assistance some could not have survived the Great Depression. Peter Galassi claims there were two fundamental axioms underlying the conception of photography in the 1930s:

First, that the photograph need be nothing more than a record of a particular fact or set of facts, chosen without regard to an established hierarchy of value and described without interference from any prior standard of pictorial elegance or beauty. Second, that a collection of such pictures, accumulated without plan, can express a personal artistic vision.³⁸

When Shahn decided to go to West Virginia, he thought he might find some interesting material relative to the coal miners' strike. He brought to this mission a trained eye and a sensitivity to the world around him. His original plan was revised. He continued exploring the mountain regions of the South, recording that world and way of life as he saw it. His photographs reveal more than mere facts and more than the personal artistic vision of a social realist or documentarian. Shahn's photographs forge new possibilities for the documentary genre.

³⁸Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), p. 28.

CHAPTER THREE

The Cotton Kingdom: Segregation and Subjectivity

For cotton is something more than a crop or an industry; it's a dynamic system ... It is map maker, trouble-maker, history-maker. It was cotton that made the South into a section. On cotton the South built up a social and political economy essentially different from the prevailing rest of the country.

Anne O'Hare McCormick
The New York Times Magazine
1 June 1930

For more than two hundred years cotton farming dominated the history and culture of the American South. In the 1930s, the South produced about 60 percent of the world's supply of cotton,¹ and more southern people owed their daily existence to cotton than to any other commodity. The boundaries of the American cotton belt have been determined more by climate than soil composition, for cotton grows in a variety of soils from sandy loams and red clays to the rich black earth of the delta. From the Carolinas to California, wherever there is a long growing season, temperate climate, moderate moisture during spring and summer (supplied by rainfall or irrigation), a dry autumn, and an abundant and inexpensive supply of labor,² the conditions necessary for the

¹Emory Q. Hawk, *Economic History of the South* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1934), pp. 516-517.

²During the colonial era, this labor came from free contract labor, servitude, and slavery. Free contract laborers were wage earners. Voluntary indentured servants

cultivation of cotton exist.

In 1935, the standard of living in agricultural communities throughout rural America was well below the national average, but conditions within the cotton growing regions were even worse. Between 1935 and 1941, Roy Stryker asked virtually every photographer he sent south to cover some aspect of cotton production. Shahn made photographs of cotton workers on the Alexander, Maria and Case Plantations, in Pulaski County, Arkansas. Nicholas Nathanson, who noted that one half of all of the images Shahn made in Arkansas were of African-Americans, believes these photographs offer not only a study of labor practice but also subtle insight into the nature of race relations at the time.³ According to Bernarda Bryson Shahn, she and her husband were stunned by

came to America of their own free will by contracting with sea captains or planters to exchange time in servitude for the cost of their passage from Europe. At the end of the contracted period of servitude, they were free to work for wages. Involuntary indentured servants, usually debtors, criminals, political or religious offenders or kidnapped persons, were sent to America and required to serve a period from four to seven years without pay. At the end of their servitude, they too became free laborers. Ibid., pp. 77-81.

³Nicholas Alfred Nathanson, "Politics, Culture and the FSA Black Image, (Ph.D. diss. University of Iowa, 1988), pp. 180-181. Shahn's images of African-Americans are not sentimentalized, and his purpose was not to appropriate black culture for financial gain or artistic recognition. At this point, he was taking photographs as source material for paintings for government projects or publications aimed at improving the lives of his subjects. Subsequently, however, some of these same subjects were extrapolated from his photographs and incorporated into murals and paintings that brought him both fame and financial gain.

the stark disparity in racial attitudes between the North and the South.⁴ For hundreds of years, racism dominated the

⁴In the 1950s and 60s Shahn was an opponent of segregation and a civil rights advocate. His concern over racial issues predates these struggles as well as his 1935 trip. He had clipped and saved photographs and newspaper accounts of two earlier racial incidents. One concerned a 1932 lynching of a Dover, Delaware black man. In the photograph, captioned "The Whipping Post," the victim was tied to a post. A group of white men and boys watched as another white man whipped him. The second incident concerned the Scottsboro Nine. Interview with the author, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, February 19, 1993 and Ben and Bernarda Bryson Shahn papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

Lynching dates back to the pre-Revolutionary War era when mobs functioned as prosecutor, jury, judge and executioner for horse thieves, alleged murderers and desperadoes. Prior to the 1880s, lynchings victims came from all groups, Native Americans, Spanish, Africans and Anglos, and occurred throughout the United States. From Reconstruction until the mid-twentieth century, lynching was primarily a means of intimidating and punishing insubordinate blacks. In 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched an intensive drive for federal anti-lynching legislation. Although without success, NAACP officials were somewhat appeased in their quest because there was a gradual decline in the number of lynchings that occurred during the 1920s. Nevertheless, the NAACP persisted in its crusade against mob violence. Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), pp. 3-72.

The case of the Scottsboro Nine was a *cause celebre* in the 1930s. On March 25, 1931, nine young black males between the ages of thirteen and eighteen who had hitched a ride out of Chattanooga, Tennessee on a Southern Railway tank car bound for Memphis were involved in a confrontation with a group of white boys. When the train arrived in Paint Rock, Alabama, the black youths were charged with assault and attempted murder and jailed in the county seat of Scottsboro. Hours later, they learned they had also been charged with rape. Two white women, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price traveling with the white boys, who were in fact prostitutes, claimed that they had been raped by the nine black youths. News of the rape of two white girls by nine black men spread like wildfire through Alabama, and soon a lynch mob was clamoring outside the jail calling for quick and certain execution. Although the Scottsboro Nine had few white allies

social and economic history of the South. The photographs that Shahn made in Tennessee and Arkansas largely concern the lives of African-Americans. I begin this chapter with an overview of the racial divide Shahn encountered and follow it

in Alabama, the sheriff, judges and national guard insisted that the nine be given a jury trial. The case attracted both the NAACP and International Labor Defense who both jockeyed with the boys and their families for the right to defend the boys. On April 12, thirteen thousand people in Chicago protested the "Scottsboro frame up," and the following day twenty thousand New Yorkers demonstrated.

Trials and appeals continued in the court system for years. The nine lived on death row for the entire time despite the fact that Ruby Bates confessed to a friend in a letter in 1932 that the accusations were false. Throughout the decade, countless articles and editorials appeared in the popular press. In April 1931 Lowell Wakefield, the Southern representative for the International Labor Defense, wrote in a letter to the ILD Central Committee that with the Scottsboro Nine they "had another Sacco-Vanzetti on their hands." James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro: The Rape Case that Shocked 1930s America and Revived the Struggle for Equality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), pp. 20-25 and Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 79.

At issue in a case of alleged violation of white women by black men is the larger fascination, fear and envy of the black male body. Because the black male was seen as savage, closer to instinct, his sexual prowess was mythologized and coveted. Despite a mordant curiosity, white men consider themselves superior to black men, and for over two hundred years have tried to a neurotic degree to control and repress the race through subjugation. Lynching is the most extreme and aggressive manifestation of this complex. Racial loathing also underpins the caricature of black culture in music, dance, art, performance, appropriated dialect and black memorabilia. Frantz Fanon, "The Man of Color and the White Woman," in *Black Skin, White Masks* trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), pp. 41-62, and Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 12. See also Thelma Golden, et. al., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994).

with a discussion of a selection of photographs Shahn made in Tennessee and Arkansas that focus on African-Americans living and working in the cotton growing areas of these states.

A. The Segregation of the Races

When Europeans arrived on the North American continent, the indigenous people were already cultivating corn, tobacco, tomatoes and cotton. The presence of cotton on the North American continent has been traced back more than seven thousand years, thousands of years before it was grown by the ancient civilizations of Pakistan or Egypt. From the seventeenth century until the end of the Civil War, East African slaves were the dominant source of labor in the rural South. They were brought to the Atlantic coast by slave traders from England, Holland and New England. They were deemed savages and given only meager housing and subsistence. They were the "property," of their owners, and the children they had became the property of the slave owners as well. Many slaves tried to buy or bargain their way out of slavery. Rarely could a slave become a "free" man. Periodically, insurrections occurred.

In 1800, Nathaniel Turner was born into slavery on a South Hampton, Virginia plantation owned by Benjamin Turner, a wealthy and exactingly cruel aristocrat. Convinced that he, like Moses, would deliver his people to freedom, young

Nat Turner studied the Bible, became a preacher and organized a rebellion among the local slaves. After the Turner insurrection of 1831, waves of fear swept over the South. In many states laws were passed forbidding black people to preach or hold religious meetings. Legislation prohibited black slaves, of any age, from learning to read or write.⁵

After the Civil War, the Black Laws of 1865-1868 controlled the movements of former slaves, limited their occupational activities, forbade the possession of firearms or the imbibing of alcoholic beverages. Labor contracts between white men and black men gave white men nearly complete control. By the turn of the century, the voting rights which had been granted to black men after the Civil War had been revoked in most Southern states. Giving the blacks so little social and economic mobility assured their dependence and secured for capitalists ample "Southern labor".⁶

In 1951, Dumas Malone wrote, "the real result of the

⁵W.E.B. Du Bois, "Religion in the South," in Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro in the South* (New York: University Books Title, 1970, first published London: Morning, Ltd, 1907). p. 165.

⁶Arthur Franklin Raper, "Race and Class Pressures," unpublished mss. for Carnegie and Mydal study for *The Negro in America* June 1, 1940. p. 177. Southern Historical Archives, Manuscripts Department, Arthur Franklin Raper Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See also W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Economic Revolution in the South," Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro in the South* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1970), pp. 77-122.

[Civil] war was not the attainment of the idealistic purposes of freeing the slaves and protecting freedom but the triumph of the northern economic system." The South's colonial economic status persisted and slavery was supplanted with a "caste system" which was at least as heinous in terms of human relations.⁷

Slave labor was replaced by tenancy and sharecropping. Although tenant farmers and sharecroppers were free, they too were trapped in a system that bordered on peonage. Immediately following the Civil War, the ratio of blacks to whites employed in cotton production was 8:1. Because of the massive migration of blacks to the industrial North during the early decades of the twentieth century and because whites accepted the vacancies they left behind, the ratio of blacks to whites employed in cotton production shifted. By the 1930s African-Americans comprised only 25 per cent of the total population in the South. The ratio of black to white tenant farmers and sharecroppers was still 3:5. Although the percentages of whites increased and blacks decreased, codes of white supremacy and post-bellum paternalism continued to be rigidly enforced by a new form of colonialism based on class. Regardless of their occupational parity, African-

⁷Dumas Malone, review of *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* *Herald Tribune*, Book Review Section, 23 December 1951, p. 3.

Americans remained at the bottom of southern class structure.⁸

The entire region south of Baltimore, Maryland, was almost completely segregated, and yet the language, music, arts and crafts, cuisine and religion reflected the richness of cross-cultural and bi-racial influences. Lilted African rhythms effectively stylized the cadences of southern music and speech, but racial segregation barred people of African descent from movie theaters, restaurants and hotels. Rest rooms, water fountains, and hospital waiting rooms were marked "white" and "colored." Colored meant any non-white and included Native Americans, Asians and Hispanics as well as African Americans. Segregation was legally authorized, and any infraction by a person of color could provoke unreasonable retribution. As Pete Daniel and others have noted, there has always been a black South and a white South.⁹ In the 1930s, blacks everywhere in America faced civil rights violations, discrimination and racial insensitivity.

In Huntingdon, Tennessee Shahn came across a crowd gathered to listen to a pitch by a travelling medicine man (Figs. 59-63). In a later interview Shahn said,

I did a series of photographs on a Saturday at noon in a small town in Tennessee of a medicine man. He had a

⁸Edwin R. Embree, "Southern Farm Tenancy: The Way Out of Its Evils," *Survey Graphic* Vol. 25, no. 3, March, 1936, pp. 149-53, and Hawk, pp. 504-506.

⁹Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads, Southern Life Since 1900* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 3.

little ventriloquist dummy and he had a negro to help him. I don't think there were ten cars on the square. They were all mule-drawn carts that had come there. This was 1935. It was incredible to see.¹⁰

The crowd gathers around the barker who was peddling a cure-all elixir that in all likelihood had a very high alcohol content. During Prohibitions (1920-1933), alcohol masked as cure-all potions was peddled by traveling salesmen. Even after the repeal of Prohibition, the practice continued as a means of support for the salesmen and a source of amusement for audiences and "spirits" in areas that maintained their "dry" status. The extant photographs of this event confirm Shahn's method of moving around and through the crowd, alternating distant and medium shots. Collectively they narrate Shahn's impression of the medicine show.

In a distant view (Fig. 61), the barker holds the ventriloquist's doll above the on-looking crowd. The doll wears blackface makeup. Behind the medicine man and barely visible stands a man wearing an Indian headdress. Off to the right edge of the photograph, segregated from the crowd and leaning against a post is the black man in blackface. He is outside of the crowd of white men gathered to watch and listen to the medicine show. A white man also stands apart

¹⁰Hank O'Neal, *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and Its People, 1935-1943* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 40.

from the crowd, closer to the camera and at the right edge of the picture frame. The white man watches the crowd watch. The black man, who looks straight ahead, is not engaged with any other person. In another photograph that Shahn made in Smithland, Kentucky (Fig. 20) two white men occupy the left two thirds of the picture plane and a black man on the far right gazes straight into the camera lens. In the Smithland photograph vertical architectural elements, a window frame and door jam, divide the photographic image and delineate the separate worlds of white and black. The social implication in Shahn's Smithland and Huntingdon photographs recalls William Sidney Mount's well known painting *The Power of Music*, 1847 (The Century Association), in which a lone black man lingers outside of a barn door apparently listening to the music being played by the white men inside the barn. The message suggested by Mount's title is that music transcends the racial barrier, but it is undermined by the visual evidence that depicts the more complex contradiction of a shared pleasure, racial difference and exclusion. The parallel composition in Shahn's photographs reiterates a black man's social exclusion in a racially segregated society.¹¹

¹¹In 1935, blackface performance was seen in burlesque and vaudeville houses and on film, but the most popular example of the genre at the time was the radio program *Amos 'n Andy* which starred two white men, Freeman Gosden and Charles Carrell. It aired for fifteen minutes five nights a week throughout the Great Depression. Although it had been

This series of photographs offers greater insight into what Shahn may have been thinking as he moved in and around the crowd. In the distant shots of the crowd the people in the crowd dissolve into a single mass of humanity, uncelebrated as individuals. The medium range shots of the man in black face with the dummy and another of the man wearing the Indian headdress suggest the carnivalesque inversion of social roles while simultaneously reinforcing traditional stereotypes. A black man masquerades as a black man; the black man is the puppet of the white man; the Indian sells firewater. In a tighter shot, Shahn caught the black man looking directly into the lens (Fig. 63). White men stand nonchalantly with their hands in their pockets along the brick wall in the background. Their heads are cropped

preceded by other similar radio shows, e.g., Sam 'n' Henry, Mack and Moran, Buck and Wheat, Anesthetic and Cerebellum, its formula for widespread success seems to have been in the universality of its characters and their tribulations rather than solely in its portrayal of black stereotypes. Minstrelsy, the earliest vehicle for blackface performance, emerged as a form of entertainment in the nineteenth century and continued throughout the United States well into the twentieth century. With skits, musical and dance routines, performers caricatured the prevailing concept of black culture which at that time was limited to assumptions regarding southern plantation life. The long-term effects of burlesqued characterizations, rooted in a contradictory repulsion/attraction to the fetishized other, have been paradoxically both the perpetuation of negative racial stereotypes and the diminution of difference. Entertainment became the primary conduit for the assimilation of black cultural values into the "white mainstream." See Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: The Free Press, 1991) and Lott, *op. cit.*

out of the image. In the foreground one young boy with his back to the lens looks into the scene. Another boy with a bloody nose scowls disapprovingly at the camera and, as a consequence, those of us who subsequently look at the photograph. The black man and ventriloquist's dummy look directly at the camera lens. The white greasepaint on the black man's mouth like the whites of the dummy's eyes exaggerate the artificiality of their masquerade and the pathos of difference.

In the South leisure activities, attending occasional social gatherings such as Church suppers, baseball games and community dances were segregated. In the 1930s movies and radio were luxuries, Most country people lived without electricity. Neighbors visited and created their own forms of entertainment. Out of the Mississippi delta, the cradle of Southern music, emerged the rhythms of blues, jazz, country and eventually rock and roll. Hillbilly melodies which evolved from Irish and Scottish music combined with Negro spirituals, and gospel music to create distinctly "American" sounds. Likewise, tap dancing, the only "American" dance, evolved from highland jigs, clogging and African tribal dances.

In West Memphis, Arkansas, Shahn photographed a blind street musician (Fig. 64). An African-American playing a violin (fiddle) occupies the right frontal portion of the photograph. Two young boys recede on the left. The song the

musician was playing was "River Stay Away From My Door."¹² Spiritual songs were the chief means of preserving the history and spiritual development of the American Negro during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As early as the seventeenth century slaves invented songs asking Moses to lead them back to Africa, and for the next two centuries slave songs revealed the hardships of slave labor and the desire for freedom.¹³

Music was an integral part of Shahn's life from his childhood in Lithuania to his work with the CBS orchestra and association with several legendary jazz musicians including Louis Armstrong. It recurs in his work in all media throughout his career. A blind street musician was the subject of an earlier photograph made in New York of a accordionist (Fig. 65). The accordionist occupies the foreground as onlookers crowd around to listen to the music he plays.

It is likely that the prototype for both of Shahn's photographs of blind musicians was Paul Strand's 1917 photograph of the blind woman selling newspapers in New York City that appeared in the last issue of *Camera Work* (Fig. 66). During the early 1930s, Shahn and Walker Evans were

¹²O'Neal, p. 15.

¹³Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1990, first published 1951), pp. 178-185.

both doing photo research at the New York Public Library. In a 1971 interview Walker Evans recalled how impressed he was by the Strand photograph.

I remember coming across Paul Strand's *Blind Woman* when I was very young, and that really bowled me over. I'd already been in that and wanted to do that. It's a very powerful picture. I saw it in the New York Public Library file of 'Camera Work', and I remember going out of there overstimulated.¹⁴

As fans of Strand's work, Evans and Shahn probably discussed the image.

At first Strand used a camera with the working lens mounted at a right angle to a fake lens. In a modified version, he used a prism so that his lens' view was at a right angle to the camera's blind front.¹⁵ In a similar fashion, Shahn's using a right angle attachment on his Leica camera allowed him to point his camera straight ahead and frame the subject on his right. Using a concealed camera,

¹⁴Leslie Katz, "An Interview with Walker Evans' (1971), in Vicki Goldberg, ed. *Photography in Print*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981, pp. 366-367 and Judith Keller, "Walker Evans and *Many Are Called: Shooting Blind*," *History of Photography*, Vol. 17, no. 2, Summer, 1993, p. 161.

¹⁵Norton T. Batkin suggests the possibility that the vendor in the Strand photograph, although labeled, "Blind," could have had one good eye and only one obviously blank or blind eye. If this were the case, then her one good eye would have been directed toward what she logically would have assumed Strand was photographing, i.e., a subject to her right rather than herself. In turn, her good and bad eyes become metaphors for how the true and false camera lens operate. Batkin, "Paul Strand's' Photographs in *Camera Work*," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. XVI, 1991, p. 324.

Evans made photographs of blind musicians in New York and Chicago. Shahn's photographs of the blind accordionist and Tennessee violinist, like Strand's earlier street photograph and Evans' subsequent examples, imply a paradoxical tension between their subjects' inability to see and the mechanical seeing eye of the camera. The view finder attachment itself becomes a metaphor for the irony of seeing and not being seen, turning a blind eye to the handicapped or racial inequity.

B. The Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union

In the 1930s many Southern intellectuals maintained that the greatest assault on American society was economic materialism. The symposium entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) presented the positions of a dozen humanists advocating community identity and agrarian life and opposing industrialization and urbanization.¹⁶ The group maintained that modern man

¹⁶*I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* by Twelve Southerners, Introduction by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). The twelve Southerners were John Crow Ransom, Donald Davidson, Frank Laurence Owsley, John Gould Fletcher, Lyle H. Lanier, Allen Tate, H.C. Nixon, Andre Nelson Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, John Donald Wade, Henry Blue Kline and Stark Young. See also Jess Gilbert and Steve Brown, "Alternative Land Reform Proposals in the 1930s: The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *Agricultural History*, 55, October 1981, pp. 351-369.

was placing so high a value on material gain that he ignored his own spiritual welfare and his moral obligations to society. Properly controlled, the benefits of science and industry might bolster his human dignity. As it was, he was turning the contrivances of the new industrialism into the objective itself. In place of beauty and truth he had erected a new ideal, Progress. Where properly controlled the benefits of science and industry might bolster his human dignity, he was turning the contrivances of the new industrialism into the objective itself [sic]. Caught up in a race to exploit the natural world through applied science, man was becoming an automaton, his entire effort directed toward highly specialized and narrow activities designed to secure immediate material profit.¹⁷

Seventy-five percent of the farmers in the South were not land owners. Two thirds of all large farms were owned by banks, investment companies or absentee investors, many living in the North. Southern Agrarians were in favor of breaking up absentee landholding, tenancy and sharecropping. They supported the redistribution of land and a system of small, individually held farms. In a 1934 address to Conference on Civil Liberties, Miss Olive M. Stone said,

[T]he South is suffering from a distinct case of artificially arrested growth. In a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country such as she has been forced to remain, in the midst of the most highly industrialized nation of the modern world, there are bound to be contradictions, conflicts and anachronisms. And just as inevitably, these conflicts give expression to a high sensitivity and self-righteousness, on the one hand, and to the violent assertion of local prejudices and injustices, on

¹⁷*I'll Take My Stand, op. cit.*, p. xxix.

the other.¹⁸

Scores and scores of farm workers, variously categorized as day laborers, croppers and tenants own little but the rag-covered muscles of their bodies. In their own parlance, they toil from "Can't see" to "Can't see," turning fat-back and corn pone into energy, energy into crops, and crops into partial payment on a deathless debt. The time merchant and absentee landlord have replaced the patriarchal planter, debt slavery has taken over the stranglehold of chattel slavery, and the total effects are about the same.¹⁹

Neither tenant farmers nor sharecroppers had land of their own. Sharecroppers exchanged labor for a percentage of the harvested crop. Tenant farmers, who furnished their own tools and stock, also pledged a percentage of their crop to the landowner. The effective differences between the two systems was marginal. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers usually lived in housing provided by the landlord, and they were constantly indebted to the plantation commissary where the landlord charged exorbitant prices for food and supplies. Crop-lien laws made it illegal for either tenant farmers or sharecroppers to receive any part of the harvested crop before all "furnish" had been paid in full to the landlord. Furnish included rent, production costs, food, clothes, and carrying charges that often amounted to 25-30% per annum. In

¹⁸Unpublished speech by Olive M. Stone, "The Plight of the Southern Share Cropper," delivered at the Conference on Civil Liberties, Washington, DC, December 8, 1934, p. 1. W.R. Amberson Papers, Southern Historical Archives, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 2

addition to interest to indebtedness, some landlords added a theoretical "cost of supervision."²⁰ Edwin Embree reported a story of a tenant farmer turning in five bales of cotton and coming out even with the landlord. The tenant handed the landlord a sixth bale and the landlord replied, "Shucks, why didn't you tell me before? Now I'll have to do the account all over again to make it come out even."²¹

The plight of the Southern tenant farmer went from bad to worse as the Depression dragged on. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 had the broad objectives of stabilizing markets by reducing the number of acres in production, developing immediate and long-range conservation policies and helping farmers secure a fair share of the national income. Landowners were paid subsidies to reduce the number of acres in production. Thousands of acres of spring cotton already planted were turned under, but many farmers increased the amount of fertilizer they were using and increased yield. Some planters were netting more money because of higher yields on the acres in production plus the federal subsidy for the acres not planted. Much of the labor force subsisted on less than 10 per cent of total farm

²⁰Raper, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

²¹Embree, p. 152.

income.²² Nothing was written in the AAA to guarantee that landlords would share farm subsidies with their tenants. On the contrary, as acreage lay fallow, fewer laborers were needed. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers not only did not receive a portion of the subsidy but many were evicted.²³

In February 1934, a group of tenant farmers, black and white, put racial prejudice aside and held a clandestine meeting in Tyronza, Arkansas. Under the leadership of socialist Norman Thomas and local businessmen Clay East and H.L. Mitchell, they founded the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU).²⁴ Fearful of retaliation by the planters and landlords they met in secret throughout 1934. Twenty-five years earlier when black tenant farmers in Elaine, Arkansas attempted to organize in protest against the unfair treatment by landowners, they were attacked and a white man was killed.

²²Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), pp. 373-374.

²³Calvin B. Hoover, "Tenants Made to Suffer from Idle Acreage," *The Press-Scimitar*, Memphis, Tennessee, May 3, 1934 and C.T. Carpenter, "Crop Reduction Money Has Gone to Planters, Leaving Tenants in Worse Condition," *The Press Scimitar*, May 17, 1935.

²⁴Spencer D. Wood, "Structures of Domination: The Southern Elite, The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the USDA, 1933-1937," paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meeting, Washington, DC, August 1995. I am grateful to Mr. Wood for allowing me to read his paper prior to its presentation and for his helpful and generous direction in the areas of agricultural history and sociology.

Seventy-nine black men were arrested. An all-white jury found twelve of the defendants guilty of murder in the first degree. They were sentenced to death and sixty-seven others were given long prison terms. The decision was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1923.²⁵ Nevertheless, planters and landlords still adamantly opposed labor unions, and authorities passed ordinance against public organizing.²⁶ Members of the STFU hoped their right to collective bargaining would be guaranteed by the Wagner Act of 1935, but ardent Southern legislators insisted that agricultural and domestic workers be excluded from the Act.²⁷

In September of 1935 nearly all laborers were picking cotton at 50-60 cents per hundred pounds. STFU members voted to strike for \$1.00 per hundred pounds of weight.²⁸ In a letter to union members, the Strike Committee wrote,

²⁵Zangrando, p. 85.

²⁶Local authorities and politicians including Senate Majority leader Joseph Robinson supported the planters and landlords. Even Roosevelt and Secretary of Agriculture Wallace did not side with the STFU, because after all, powerful democrats were landowners, not poor farm laborers. In those days, registered voters had to pay a poll tax of \$1.00, an unthinkable sum for workers with an average annual income of less than \$200. Tom Vasey and Josiah C. Folsom, *U.S. Farm Securities Administration Survey Labor Conditions*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1938), pp. 10-11.

²⁷Schlesinger, pp. 376-377 and 400-401 also Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression America, 1929-1941* (New York: Time Books, 1993), pp. 150, 262 and 258-259.

²⁸Vasey and Folsom, p. 10.

We have been chosen as the Strike Committee. We are going to face death perhaps. That others may live. The planters are going to organize nightriders to beat and kill men, to burn houses and churches, shoot up peoples['] homes. They will try to starve us out. [W]e must have a Strike Relief Fund. All of us must give so much -- 5¢ for each member who can, it will go a long way.²⁹

Planters threatened the strikers with loaded shotguns, broke up union meetings and tried to intimidate union officials. In Marked Tree, Arkansas, an irate Methodist minister said, "I could lead a mob to lynch every landlord in the county if these people are not fed, but we do not want to resort of violence; we have carried our grievance to the courts." He was arrested and charged with anarchy, attempting to usurp the government of Arkansas and sentenced to six months in jail.³⁰ The strikers held firm; the planters gave in and granted the increase to \$1.00 per hundred pound load.³¹

²⁹Letter to Friends of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, September 5, 1935. unsigned "for obvious reasons." W.R. Amberson papers, op. cit.

³⁰Schlesinger, p. 377.

³¹Although historical accounts and STFU files indicate success, the U.S. Farm Securities Administration Survey published in 1938 reported that in 1936, there had been only a modest increase from the previous year in the rate per 100 pounds, i.e., from 50-60 cents to 60-75 cents per 100 pounds. The average daily income reported by laborers was 11 cents while operators were reporting a figure of \$1.04 for the same day's work. Despite the agreed upon rate increase, landlords and planters continued to evict tenants and sharecroppers.

Shahn stopped in West Memphis, Marked Tree and Little Rock, Arkansas before reaching the Case, Maria and Alexander Plantations in Pulaski County. On the Alexander plantation Shahn made a series of photographs that chronicled the daily life of cotton workers during the fall harvest. He was not interested in the rhetorical valorization of the underprivileged or the dignity of labor, yet his highly charged images cannot be seen as an objective apolitical transcription. Just as in the mining country, he was looking for images that pointed to the concrete examples of how real people were coping with the Depression.

C. Cotton farming

At 6:30 a.m. cotton pickers, men and women, young and old, gathered together to wait for a ride to the field for the day's work (Figs. 67-71). Shahn's documentation of the cotton workers is another example of Shahn's cinematic approach. As Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly Brannan noted, "The photographs [depicting cotton workers] show how Shahn moved through and around the scene as he made a set of exposures ... for example, the overall coverage includes a wide-perspective establishing shot, medium shots of little

The ranks of the STFU swelled to 25,000 members. In January of 1936, another altercation occurred in Earle, Arkansas. Two union members were shot and union organizers were abducted, threatened and forced to leave Arkansas. Schlesinger, pp. 373-38; Southern Tenant Farmers Union papers, National Archives, Washington, DC.

groups of pickers, and a near close-up of a man on the stoop."³²

In distant views (Fig. 66 and 67), cotton pickers are seen assembled by a wooden house holding empty white bags that they will spend the day filling with cotton bolls. Shahn moved closer for a tighter shot. In Fig. 68, he frames a section of a porch where workers stand, lean or sit to wait. One man is smoking a cigarette. Shahn snapped the shutter just as the man makes eye contact with the camera lens and exhales a puff of smoke. The smoke is frozen in the center of the image. It arrests the general reception, the *studium*. This eye catching detail, an accident of timing, locks the image into a specific moment in time and a specific place. The puff of smoke acts as the *punctum* that takes us back to 1935 to Pulaski County, Arkansas and sets up a paradox between the transitory and the eternal. The puff of smoke is a temporary atmospheric phenomenon, an ephemeral moment that existed fleetingly in the past but is preserved and always present in the photograph.

Women pickers (Figs. 70 and 71), just like men, put in a full-day. Wives and daughters were usually up before dawn to pump water, build a fire on a wood burning stove or outdoors to prepare a meager breakfast before going to the fields.

³²Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, ed., *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 78.

When daylight allowed either in the morning or early evening, they did their canning, mending, making soap and cleaning.³³ Able-bodied women and children worked from sun up to sun set just like the men, sometimes with lower productivity because of their lesser strength, yet their participation was vital for the economic survival of the family.³⁴

In agricultural communities, the family is an economic unit as well as a social one. For parents, more children meant more field hands, a higher yield per family and the assurance that some children would survive to care for them in their old age (Fig. 72). The children of sharecroppers did not have carefree lives. Many had never seen a mattress. Most slept on straw filled with ticks. There was little sanitation. Those who bathed in tin wash pans had no privacy, towels or soap. Children and adults alike ate with their fingers because they had no forks. It was not unusual for children to "have no shoes, wraps, dresses, lunches, books, paper or pencil." They were constantly ill with typhoid, tuberculosis, malaria or ague, and many babies died in their sleep from "summer complaint." Those who were not

³³Kelley, p. 36.

³⁴Article 4 of the STFU Constitution stated membership was open "without discrimination as to race, color, religious or political beliefs," to sharecroppers, tenants, farm owners, ministers, teachers and laborers who were of good reputation, 18 years of age or over. It is important to note that STFU membership was extended to women. In 1935 the STFU was breaking new ground in this regard. STFU papers, op. cit.

physically ill were frequently reported to be sullen and listless.³⁵

Shahn photographed children in the cotton fields of Arkansas (Figs. 21 and 73). In an unsympathetic landscape, barren except for the prickly defoliated cotton plants, school-age girls trudge along parallel rows picking the remaining bolls of autumn cotton to fill the large white bags they shoulder. In Fig. 73, the young girl on the right, isolated in the composition and in her thoughts, pulls the cotton from the plant, mindful not to damage the seeds which if broken release their thick oil saturating and spoiling the cotton.³⁶ Just outside of the frame on the left is a second

³⁵Lillian Perrine Davis, "Relief and the Sharecropper," *Survey Graphic*, Vol. 25, no. 1, January 1936, pp. 22-23.

The prevalence of disease among migratory cotton pickers was even higher. In addition to the diseases noted above, migratory workers, especially the children frequently contracted pneumonia, dysentery, rickets and smallpox. Doctors rarely visited the migrant camps, but attending nurses reported that the major cause of chronic illness was malnourishment. The diet included no meat or vegetables and was mostly starch. Malcolm Brown and Orin Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers in Arizona*, WPA Division of Research (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1939), pp. 9-10.

³⁶Before the Civil War, only enough cottonseed was saved each year to plant cotton for another year. In the post-war years, the by-products of cottonseed became increasingly important. Cottonseed was used for fertilizer and vegetable oil. During World War I, it was discovered that seed hulls could be burned for fuel and used for livestock feed and that cottonseed oil could be further refined into lard, soap and margarine. Herman C. Nixon, "The Rise of the American Cottonseed Oil Industry," *Journal of Political Economy* 38 (February 1930), pp. 73-85 and Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana and Chicago, Illinois:

girl. The girls' tattered clothes, the ill-fitting shoes worn by the child on the left and the fact that these children are not in school in the fall signify their economic status as well as the principle that labor receives so little of the wealth it produces. Shahn kept a copy of this photograph and on the back was written "Arkansas schools for colored children do not open until January 1st so as not to interfere with cotton picking."³⁷ Printed across the white bag pulled by the truncated figure on the left is stenciled "O.N. ALEXANDER JR.," the name of the white plantation owner, the absent landowner. The stenciled name is a metonymical designation that stands not only for the person not present but also for the invisible but omnipresent history of appropriated labor, for classism and racism perpetuated by agrarian capitalism.

In the spring cotton workers tilled the soil and planted rows of seeds. After the seedlings sprouted and throughout the long, hot growing season, laborers walked through the fields spreading fertilizer, dusting for insects and "chopping cotton," the term refers to cutting the plants back and pulling weeds. The cotton plant flowers and when the flowers drop off, buds appear. At the end of the summer, the crop is "laid by." The cotton continues to grow but because

University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 249-250.

³⁷Reverse of photograph, Ben Shahn Collection, Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

the plants are now mature enough not to need constant care, the work force would have a reprieve until the buds fill out and the first puffs of white lint appear. Harvesting began in September and continued into the fall. Not all of the bolls burst at once, cotton pickers went to the fields and continued picking until all the crop was harvested.³⁸

Picking cotton by hand is back-breaking work. Pickers work the straight and narrow rows of cotton dragging albatross-like bags of cotton behind them (Figs. 74 and 75).³⁹ By aiming his camera toward the ground Shahn cropped out the horizon line. The depth of field is flattened suggesting enclosure, entrapment. In contrast, Dorothea Lange's photograph of Filipinos working the lettuce field in Salinas, California, the workers hump over the lettuce, silhouetted against the sky (Fig. 76). In the Lange photograph the effect of the back lighting emphasizes the laborers' relationship to the land. The lettuce workers like the gleaners in Millet's nineteenth-century painting seem to grow out of the ground. Nevertheless, the presence of daylight suggests that the long work day will end. Shahn's cotton

³⁸Interview with Esther Thompson, 7 January 1993 and Daniel, pp. 3-4.

³⁹Herman C. Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* is illustrated with several of the photographs that Shahn made on the Alexander Plantation in 1935. One of a single young female with a crocheted cap is captioned "The sight of the first cotton boll gave her a backache." [Library of Congress USF-33-6218-M3]. Nixon, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), between pp. 10 and 11.

pickers move toward an unending horizon line; there is no visual demarkation of time or closure. Time and space collapse and worker and environment fuse.

At the end of the day, each man, woman and child would drag his or her cotton in for weighing (Fig. 77). One bag at a time is hoisted onto the make-shift spring scale. Cotton pickers stand and wait their turn to learn the value of their day's labor. Ned Cobb, the Alabama former slave and sharecropper whose memories were recorded and transcribed by Theodore Rosengarten said that as a child he could pick a hundred pounds of cotton in a day, when he was an adult, he would bring in three hundred and as an old man, he slipped back to a hundred. To Cobb this confirmed the Biblical saying, "once a man and twice a child."⁴⁰

The totals were recorded by the foreman (Fig. 78), and the cotton was loaded into wagons (Figs. 79 and 80). In his photograph of the foreman Shahn identifies a sub-stratum within the labor class. Working in virtual isolation, the foreman is sandwiched between the pickers, who are suspicious and resentful of all supervisors, and white management, an equally mistrusting group who would never accept any black person as a social or intellectual equal. In fact, in order to prevent tenants from stealing and selling cotton at night, it was in most southern states a misdemeanor to sell cotton

⁴⁰Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1974), p. 108 and Daniel, p. 158.

between sunset and sunrise.⁴¹ Engrossed in the calculations of the day's productivity, the foreman performs a white collar bookkeeping job on a mud encrusted wagon wheel.⁴²

In another view of the wagon, the foreman turns away from his book (Fig. 80). Field workers load the cotton after weighing. The image is almost symmetrically composed with figures right and left of center. The focal point of the photograph is, however, the mordant shadow cast by the man on the left whose right arm is raised to perpendicular with the wagon. The eerie anthropomorphic, surrealistic form falls across the middle portion of the wagon. No one in the photograph attends to this nightmarish mass. It seems to loom over the scene like a ghost from the past or future, perhaps, ominously portending an era when agribusiness would displace three quarters of a million tenant farmers and

⁴¹Raper, p. 181

⁴²Within the cotton culture, moving from the fields to the mill was perceived as a social and economic advancement. This move, which was usually a generational shift, was less socially alienating because the worker established new social relationships with other mill workers. Promotion to foreman was, however, less coveted. Just as in field work, it meant social isolation from the rank and file. Many workers preferred lower paying jobs with limited opportunity for advancement over taking the first step to greater economic security because it meant being ostracized by their envious and mistrustful friends. See Benjamin Brawley, *A Social History of the American Negro* (New York: Afro-American Reprint Library, 1968, c 1921); Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936), and John Kenneth Morland, *Millways of Kent* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

sharecroppers,⁴³ or retrospectively pointing to worse times.⁴⁴

Mechanization on plantations began to accelerate during the 1930s and 1940s, and labor-intensive manual agriculture gradually died out as landowners replaced human hands, hoes and mules with tractors, cotton harvesters and the products of agricultural chemistry.⁴⁵ One observer was exaggerating only slightly when he said, "Moses and Hammurabi would have

⁴³According to the U.S. Bureau of Census in 1930 the total number of sharecroppers in sixteen Southern states and Missouri were 716,256. In 1959, the number was 121,037. In 1960 the number was so insignificant that census compilers stopped counting them as a category. Susan Archer Mann, *Agrarian Capitalism in Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 96.

⁴⁴In terms of labor, clearly, the era of slavery was the worst of times. Slaves depended entirely upon slave owners for survival. The difficulty of this period was exacerbated when in the nineteenth century the entire cotton economy was threatened by the boll weevil. One farmer described his frustration, "you couldn't keep your fields clean--boll weevil schemin' to eat your crop faster than you workin' to get him out." Ned Cobb, the Alabama sharecropper and former slave whose autobiography was recorded by historian Theodore Rosengarten, was referring to the weevil when he said, "All God's dangers aint a white man." Rosengarten, p. 144; Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, p. 14.

⁴⁵Jack Temple Kirby cites the declining number of hours of labor input for each hundredweight of cotton as a measure of the impact of mechanization on cotton production. "In 1940, 33.82 hours were needed. By 1946, the figure had dropped dramatically to 24.57 hours. The real plunge came between 1949 and 1953: 1949 (20.7 hrs.); 1950 (12.95 hrs.); 1951 (10.04 hrs.); and in 1952 (4.82 hrs.). Between 1949 and 1952 in twenty rapidly mechanizing Mississippi Delta counties, employment of unskilled agricultural labor dropped by 71 percent. "A New Deal for the Cotton South," *Southern Exposure*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring, 1987, p. 53. See also Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

been at home with tools and implements of the tenant farmer."⁴⁶ Government subsidies allowed wealthy landowners to lay fallow unproductive land, plant it with soybeans or other nitrogen enriching crops, returning it to greater productivity the following season. Scientific farming, genetic engineering, crop rotation, farm subsidies and land consolidation all contributed to the devolution of the tenant system and the wholesale eviction of tenants of all races.⁴⁷

A white sharecropper's wife recalled that the landlord told them "he'd rented every acre to the gov'ment. He didn't say a word about our crops we was about middle ways of. The move jist came on us before we could plan for it."⁴⁸ As Shahn documented, the housing provided by the landowner was modest

⁴⁶Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), p. 150; Mann, p. 103.

⁴⁷Mann claims that because owners of large cotton plantations were the first to let their sharecroppers go, hire skilled labor and invest in technology, they were the first capitalist farmers. Smaller independent farmers were frequently in the same position as evicted tenants as foreclosures by banks and insurance companies left them homeless and without property as well. In 1934, banks and insurance companies owned 30 percent of all Southern cotton land. Land became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few corporate owners. Mann, pp. 101-102.

Many of the evicted farmers became migratory cotton workers working mainly in Arizona, Oklahoma and Texas. Migratory cotton workers were 95% white (usually single men, couples or families with only one child). The average age was 20-45. Other evicted farmers, either lived on government assistance or moved out of the region. Brown and Cassmore, p. 25.

⁴⁸Kirby, "A New Deal in the Cotton South," p. 52.

(Figs. 81) often without doors, windows or running water. Eviction meant the loss of work as well as housing, however meager.

In 1934, a group of liberal Southerners Will W. Alexander, Charles S. Johnson and Edwin Embree, working under the auspices of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, conducted a study and published their findings as *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*. The same group was the driving force behind the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act.⁴⁹

The Bankhead-Jones Act of 1937 proposed to help tenants and farm laborers become owners through government loans at low interest and long terms for repayments. To carry out the Bankhead-Jones Act, the Resettlement Administration was transformed, renamed the Farm Security Administration and

⁴⁹Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 187-188.

In a letter from W.R. Amberson to the Executive Secretary of the Socialist Party in Chicago, Illinois dated November 16, 1935, Amberson stated that the substance of the Bankhead-Jones Bill had been written a group of Southern socialists "who prevailed these two men to sponsor it. I want to see the Socialist Party get publicity, but it occurs to me that we might have more chance of getting our bill adopted if its origin were not known generally." W.R. Amberson papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In reading through papers of various activists working out of the University of North Carolina, Vanderbilt University and Duke University, I discovered many were reluctant to have their names openly associated with the Socialist Party for fear of retribution, especially the loss of academic positions. Consequently, many of these files contain letters with the names of the authors and with addresses withheld.

transferred to the Department of Agriculture. Rexford Tugwell resigned and Will W. Alexander became the new director. With his appointment the attack on rural poverty entered a new phase.⁵⁰

When the reorganization was announced, Stryker worried about the future of the Information Division of the Resettlement Administration. Milton Eisenhower, a long-time friend of Stryker's, was Chief of the Information Division of the Department of Agriculture and proved to be a helpful ally.⁵¹ Shortly after the reorganization, Stryker maneuvered to have Ben Shahn transferred to the FSA to become an official RA/FSA photographer.⁵² Scientific farming, crop rotation and mechanization slowly transformed the near feudal

⁵⁰Schlesinger, p. 381.

⁵¹F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (New York: DaCapo, 1972), pp. 95-96.

⁵²AAA price-support and acreage reduction programs continued with devastating effects on sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the cotton South. As noted by Susan Archer Mann, "...the interracial STFU played a significant role in bringing about protection for tenant farmers and sharecroppers under the new AAA of 1938...Yet even these minor efforts at reform were attacked by the nation's largest agricultural lobby, the American Farm Bureau Federation, an organization dominated by well-to-do farmers and landowners. Indeed, this lobby not only fought reform legislation, but also helped to purge the U.S. Department of Agriculture of many of its most progressive personnel and agencies. hence, the victories for Southern tenant farmers won by union protests were short-lived and limited." Mann, p. 102.

farming methods in the South. The lives of countless farmers, black and white, changed forever; cotton, however, remains the number one cash crop in the region.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Artist Among Churchgoers

*In Christ there is no East or West,
In him no South or North,
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.*

*Join hands, then, brothers of the faith,
Whate'er your race may be!
Who serves my Father as a son
Is surely kin to me.*

John Oxenham
Negro Melody, 1908
The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church

In 1925, H.L. Mencken coined the term "The Bible Belt" to refer to the section of the United States that sweeps across the Midwest and the South where Protestant fundamentalism prevailed. During the Great Depression just as today, Christianity, whether fundamental, Anglican or Roman Catholic, was the dominant religion throughout the South. There the tenets of the Christian belief system have been enlisted to constrain and shape cultural and social identity. Humility and delayed reward have contributed to the oppression of the majority for the economic and political gain of a few, and patriarchy as described in the Bible has been the primary social model used to rationalize the subjugation of women, minorities and the working class.

As an artist, a Russian émigré, a Jew and a northeastern

liberal, Shahn was in almost every way an outsider to the largely Protestant South, and yet his photographs that refer directly or loosely to religious life convey a sensitive understanding of the complex influence Christianity has played in shaping southern culture. Shahn's purpose in making these photographs was not to analyze Christianity but to document social activities that were church centered.

In this chapter I discuss a select group of images as they relate to Shahn's own belief system and in the context of the documentary invention practiced during the 1930s. Many of the photographs that Shahn made on Sundays, the Christian Sabbath, provided source material for his subsequent painting series titled the "Sunday Paintings." Others such as those of revival meetings document a specific practice. Woven throughout the body of Shahn's southern photography is an awareness that Christianity permeates the socio-historical canvas of everyday life there. In general southern Christians were either Protestant Fundamentalists, members of one of the Black Churches or Roman Catholic, all sharing with Judaism the lessons of the Old Testament. I maintain that Shahn's Jewish heritage, specifically knowledge of the Old Testament and the Cabala contributed to the depth of his insight.¹

¹Shahn mentions his early study of the Bible and interest in the Cabala in an interview with Saul Benison, 29 October 1956, p. 10. Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York.

When Shahn was a boy in Lithuania, he learned prayers and psalms from the Bible and saw the characters of the scripture as timeless and transcendent icons. In *Love and Joy About Letters* the artist wrote that through the experience of copying from the Bible for nine hour a day he was,

... learning the true history of things, which was the Bible; from lettering its words to learning its prayers and its psalms, which were my first music, my first memorized verse. Time was to me then, in some curious way, timeless. All the events of the Bible were, relatively, part of the present. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were 'our' parents -- certainly my mother's and father's, my grandmother's and my grandfather's, but mine as well.²

Ziva Amishai-Maisel believes that during the 1930s, Shahn was at odds with Judaism, but like many other Jews of his generation, his interest in Old Testament themes and Jewish genre was revived during the 1940s and 1950s after the atrocities of the Holocaust were exposed.³ In the mid-1930s Shahn left his first wife, Tillie and their two children, Judith and Ezra, became estranged from his family, his in-laws and the largely immigrant Jewish Brooklyn community where he had been reared. Whether his attraction to Bernarda

²Ben Shahn. *Love and Joy About Letters* (New York: Grossman, 1963), p. 5 and Kenneth W. Prescott, *The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn* (New York: Quadrangle Press/The New York Time Book Company, 1973), p. xv.

³ Ziva Amishai-Maisel, "Ben Shahn and the Problem of Jewish Identity," *Jewish Art*, Vol. 12-13, 1986-87, pp. 304-319.

Bryson, a communist, the daughter of a prosperous mid-western businessman and a gentile, was an unconscious drive to assimilate is inconclusive. Nevertheless, the choices Shahn was making in his personal life at this time indisputably altered important ties with his ethnic and religious past, if only temporarily and superficially.

In his essay "On Nonconformity," Shahn revealed his tolerance for religious difference and his position on the social significance of higher spiritual values:

I have no quarrel with scientific skepticism as an attitude. I am sure that it provides a healthy antidote to fanaticism of all kinds, probably including the totalitarian kind, but as a philosophy or way of life it is only negative. It is suspicious of belief. It negates positive values. Aesthetically, it refuses to commit itself.

For society cannot grow upon negatives. If man has lost his Jehovah, his Buddha, his Holy Family, he must have new, perhaps more scientifically tenable beliefs, to which he may attach his affections. Perhaps, Humanism and individualism are the logical heirs to our earlier more mystical beliefs... But in any case, if we are to have values, a spiritual life, a culture, these things must find their imagery and their interpretation through the arts.⁴

Almost all of the RA/FSA photographers made pictures of some aspect of religious life in America. By the end of 1935 instructions to do so were part of every shooting script provided by Roy Stryker. Walker Evans, whose subjects were more often a matter of personal choice than determined by

⁴*Paragraphs on Art by Ben Shahn* (New York: Spiral Press, 1952), p. 4.

Stryker's directives, photographed rural churches in Alabama and South Carolina as part of an ongoing study of American architecture rather than because of the parishioners or their uses for the one-room wooden structures. Marion Post Wolcott, on the other hand, was inspired to photograph the curious religious rites of the pentacostals in Kentucky but was admonished from entering their churches. Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell took a dimmer view of evangelical religion. In *You Have Seen Their Faces* Caldwell's passages condemning the Church as reactionary and an obvious opiate of the people are accompanied by Bourke-White's photographs of churchgoers cavorting about nearly delirious with religious fervor (Figs. 82 and 83).⁵

Shahn, like Marion Post Wolcott, kept a respectful distance. He paid close attention to what people did on Sundays. In keeping with the Old Testament custom followed by Jews and Gentiles, the Sabbath was kept holy. It was a day of worship and rest.

After returning to New York in the late 1930s, Shahn executed his "Sunday Paintings" a group of paintings based in large part on his impressions of what he saw people doing on

⁵John Rogers Puckett, *Five Photo-Textual Documentaries from The Great Depression* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 70 and Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Viking Press, 1937).

The church doors were locked from the inside to prevent outsiders from entering. In order to get these photographs, Caldwell and Bourke-White climbed through a window.

Sundays while he was traveling as a government employee. The twenty paintings were exhibited at the Julian Levy Gallery in 1940. The writer and critic Seldon Rodman said of them,

[The Sunday Paintings] embody for the first time some of the visual impressions of the 'American scene' which [Shahn] picked up while making photographic surveys in the South and Middle West for the Farm Security Administration in 1935-37. They represent his effort to express his ambivalent feelings about America not, as later, in terms of poetic symbols but by the blunter method of contrast. Since the paradoxes of men out of work amid plenty, of bedraggled poverty in surroundings of stream-lined efficiency, of the artist's indifference to the world he lives in, and of the city's indifference to the country, were juxtapositions on the simplest level, the colors he used tended to be harsh, even drab...⁶

Summarizing his own observations, the artist wrote in

"Biography of a Painting,"

I found the qualities of people a constant pleasure; there was coal miner, a cellist, who organized a quartet for me -- the quartet having three musicians. There was the muralist who painted the entire end of his barn with scenes of war and then of plenty, the whole painting entitled "Uncle Sam Did It All." There were the five Musgrove brothers who played five harmonicas--the wonderful names of people, Plato Jordan and Jasper Lancaster, and towns Pity Me, and Tail Holt, and Bird-In Hand. There were the poor who were rich in spirit, and the rich who were also sometimes rich in spirit. There was the South and its story-telling art, stories of snakes and storms and haunted houses, enchanting, and yet such talent thriving in the same human shell with

⁶Seldon Rodman, *Portrait of the Artist as an American: Ben Shahn, A Biography with Pictures* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1951), p. 77.

hopeless prejudices, bigotry and ignorance.⁷

One of these paintings, *Myself Among Churchgoers* (Fig. 84), offers an especially intriguing point of departure for studying Shahn's observation of southern religious life as well as the fundamental contradiction between his passion as a social realist and the inherent detachment of the photographic medium. In the painting the artist depicts himself in brightly colored clothes, turned away from the main action, distanced even further from the central action of the narrative by the mechanical device of a right-angle view finder attached to his camera. He positioned himself physically within the painting, suggesting a sociological connection to the churchgoers; however, he is not integrated with the churchgoers by either gesture or eye contact. In a similar vein, while traveling in the South, Shahn was simultaneously present although alienated from certain aspects of the religious life there.

Myself Among the Churchgoers, 1939 was painted one year after Shahn resigned from the RA/FSA, and at the same time that he and Bernarda Bryson were working on a mural for the Bronx Post Office at 149th Street and Grand Concourse. The painting is a composite of a sketch of himself holding his

⁷Ben Shahn. *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 40-41.

Leica camera with its right-angle viewfinder and bits and pieces extrapolated from various photographs he had made while working for the RA/FSA. The church was taken from a photograph made in Kentucky; the two dowagers were photographed walking down a street on their way to church in Natchez, Mississippi (Fig. 85). Their sour expression, determined stride and conservative dark clothing suggest the righteous indignation of two no-nonsense Sunday school teachers. On the stanchion in front of the church is the title of the sermon, "Is the Government Fostering Irreligion in Art???"⁸

The question serves as a built-in caption and is explained by the events surrounding the execution of the Bronx mural. The painting was created in response to the controversy that arose over the content of Shahn's proposal for the mural. Assistant Chief Postmaster Goldman, the Reverend Ignatius W. Cox and other New York politicians vehemently opposed Shahn's plan to include a Walt Whitman poem in the post office mural. The assigned theme for the mural was to be the "Resources of America." The controversial lines from Whitman's poem "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" were:

⁸Rodman, p. 79. Rodman incorrectly claimed that the church was in Pennsylvania. Laura Katzman has located the church in Kentucky. "The Politics of Media: Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn," *American Art*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (Winter 1993), p. 78.

Brain of the new world, what a task is thine
 To formulate the modern out of the peerless grandeur of
 the modern;
 Out of thyself comprising science to recast poems,
 churches, art
 (Recast, maybe discard them, end them--maybe their work
 is done, who knows?)
 By Vision, hand, conception, on the background of the
 mighty past, the dead,
 To limn with absolute truth the might living present.⁹

A public outcry transpired because it was deemed inappropriate to use Federal Funds to support such blasphemous sentiments, the patriotism of the poet and artist and freedom of expression aside. Shahn was equally indignant. Having already been involved with Diego Rivera's destroyed mural for the RCA building and his own rejected murals for Riker's island, he was well aware of the consequences of taking an uncompromising position despite his avowed position that it was the province of the artist to keep debate alive. He confirmed this belief in a 1956 statement, "Today's conformity is, more than anything else, the retreat from controversiality. Tomorrow's art, if it is to be at all stirring, will no doubt be performed upon today's forbidden territory."¹⁰ Nevertheless in 1939, he reluctantly deferred to church and political officials and

⁹Rodman, p. 83.

¹⁰Shahn, "On Nonconformity," in *The Shape of Content*, p. 91.

removed the offensive lines from the Bronx mural.¹¹ In *Myself Among the Churchgoers* Shahn portrays himself neither as a churchgoer nor a protestor, merely a reporter and the operator of a transcriptive machine.

Seldon Rodman notes that one reviewer of the Sunday Paintings commented, "Everybody sits around dejected, grim as though waiting for something to happen to them -- and something not very inspiring at that."¹² In *WPA Sunday, 1939* (Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan, Fig. 86) and *Sunday, Scotts Run, West Virginia*, (Whitney Museum of American Art, Fig. 90), Shahn portrays the same world-weary concern he captured in earlier photographs (Figs. 87-89). On Sunday afternoons after church, poor and working class southerners gathered in the church yard, on street corners, outside of train stations or in front of cafes to talk and visit. It was a day of rest and fellowship. The more fortunate families who owned a car went for Sunday drives often to visit relatives, shut-ins or distant neighbors.

With the invention of the automobile, outdoor advertizing emerged as a viable means of promoting goods and services to a newly mobile society. Products and philosophy as diverse as Coca-Cola, Burma Shave, the American Dream and

¹¹The final version of the mural, now in a disgraceful state of neglect, included vignettes of cotton pickers, textile workers and other American workers many derived from photographs Shahn made for the RA/FSA.

¹²Rodman, p. 77.

the path to salvation appeared on billboards and sequential signs along America's roads and highways. Road signs were frequently the subject of RA/FSA photographs. Walker Evans became so intrigued with road signs that later in life he became an ardent collector even carrying liquid wrench with him to loosen the rusted nuts and bolts that secured these "found" collectibles.¹³

Shahn was also drawn to road signs, more for the spontaneity of the lettering and folk-art quality. Hand-painted figures pointed out the direction of a traveling circus, fresh produce even local funeral parlors. Many were crafted in the form of a cross bearing legends such as "Jesus Saves" or "Jesus is Coming, Are Your Ready?" In Williamson, West Virginia, a small community in Mingo County just across the border from Pike County, Kentucky and deep in the coal mining region of Southern Appalachia, Shahn made a photograph of a sign in a cornfield (Fig. 91). The sign, shaped like an arrow and tilted to a 45 degree angle, reads "PREPARE TO MEET GOD." The oversize P nestled in the arrowhead and the word GOD filling the tail of the arrow caught Shahn's eye. It is not clear whether there is a church located ahead on the road or if the message is a reminder of death and the promises made in the Book of Revelations that on judgment day all souls will be weighed, sin will be punished and virtue

¹³Interview with William Christenberry, June 8, 1995.

rewarded, eternally. It is most likely that Shahn snapped the shutter to document an unpretentious example of folk art; nevertheless, the sign ominously foretold the peculiar social emphasis on religion that Shahn was about to encounter.

In Southern Appalachia, Protestant sects were predominately fundamentalist.¹⁴ Dwight Billings and Robert Goldman claim that the drift by mountaineers toward fundamentalism is consistent with a tradition of dissent and working-class resistance. The loss of their land and independence to absentee corporations served to strengthen familial and religious ties among mountain people.¹⁵ Local

¹⁴In *Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash explains that Anglicanism (any of the churches belonging to the communion of the Church of England such as the Episcopal Church in the United States), the religion of early coastal settlers, never spread to the inland Southern regions. In its stead, more evangelical sects emerged. Anglicans were remarkable for religious freedom, but in Cash's words regarded "emotion as a kind of moral smallpox." Celtic immigrants were not moved by liturgy or the exegesis of scripture; they preferred the passion, whimsy even tyranny of the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Quakers, Huguenots, Mennonites and Dunkers either converted or quietly moved inland to establish insular colonies where the beliefs and mores of their sects could be observed without persecution or intervention. Because these groups were pacifists and, in time, abolitionists, they were never fully integrated into Southern politics. Eventually, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Pentacostals became the Protestant sects with the largest membership and greatest social and political influence. W.J. Cash. *Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. 53-54.

¹⁵ Dwight B. Billings and Robert Goldman, "Religion and Class Consciousness in the Kanawha County School Textbook Controversy," in *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence* Allen Batteau, ed. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), pp. 69, 73.

belief systems hold to the basic tenets of the parent denominations to which they belong, but ceremonial rituals often vary from church to church. These vagaries identify a specific church and recognition of these slight differences identifies a parishioner as a member of a specific church.

The idiosyncracies evolve from two sources. The first is predicated upon the concept of predestination. In many Protestant denominations an individual has the will to either conform or reject the grace of God which has preordained salvation. Witnessing, giving testimony or acknowledging publicly God's grace, is the first step to achieving membership in the church. Secondly, some Protestant churches alter rituals and establish practices that are specific to their congregations (in contrast to Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism where the administration and sequence of the sacraments are standardized). Being a member in good standing of a local church frequently was determined by participation in a series of rites that, for example, would start with witnessing, followed by Baptism by immersion or "sprinkling" and then various other rituals such as foot washing -- all in a particular order set by each local church to identify those people who "belonged." Membership identified inclusion in a local clan, so to speak, and by the same token, it set the boundaries of that church's

community.¹⁶

According to the shooting scripts supplied by Stryker, field photographers were asked to gather photographs of religious services; however, strangers such as Shahn or other RA/FSA photographers, were unwelcome inside most of the fundamentalist churches in Appalachia. The services were sacred and not a spectacle performed for curiosity seekers. In the spring and summer Baptism by immersion or "dunking" was often performed in a nearby river or stream, a closer approximation to John the Baptist's immersion of Christ in the River Jordan. In 1941, Marion Post Wolcott was able to photograph the sacrament being performed outdoors in rural Kentucky (Fig. 92). The wide view encompasses the rite, the witnesses and the landscape. It also demonstrates that she respectfully maintained a discrete distance.

When Studs Terkel was gathering material for his 1970 book concerning life during the Depression, he interviewed a former circuit riding Presbyterian minister who told him,

We have a religious phenomenon in American that has its origin in the South. Established churches followed urban trends. People out here were isolated and delivered religion on the basis of what they saw. Store-bought clothes--which they could not buy out of poverty--became worldly and sinful. We had rather be beggars in the House of the Lord than dwell in king's palaces. They were denied schooling. They were called rednecks and

¹⁶Melanie L. Sovine, "Studying Religious Belief Systems in Their Social Historical Context," in Batteau, *Appalachia and America*, p. 51.

crackers and damn niggers. But the Bible was God's Book. Refused access to medical aid, faith healed the body as well as the soul. 'We seek another world.' It was a protest against things economically unavailable. I interpreted this protest and related it to the Bible-- instead of calling them hillbillies and rednecks.¹⁷

Circuit riding preachers were a part of the larger phenomenon of migratory or ambulatory workers that dotted the American landscape during the Great Depression. They had no home church. They earned their living like traveling salesmen going from town to town peddling; their product line was the Word of God.

Shahn attended one such revival meeting in Nashville, Tennessee where he made a series of photographs of the itinerant preacher, his entourage and the onlookers (Figs. 93-97). In one the preacher stands at the center of the stage (Fig. 93). He is surrounded by a choir. He preaches and they sing for the people who stand in front of the stage. The bodies of those looking on cast long shadows signifying the end of the day. Most revivals were held every evening for a week. They were planned far in advance and the organizers moved from town to town spreading the "Good News," saving sinners and collecting alms. Evangelical preachers "often exhorted their audiences to tears and physical

¹⁷Studs Terkel. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 331.

reactions."¹⁸

At the revival Shahn attended the city of Nashville is the backdrop for the make-shift stage; a bridge crosses behind the missionaries and merchants and customers look on from the street. In a dramatic, tightly focused photograph of the singers (Fig. 95), a theatrical light falls across the faces of the choir members and their hymnals emphasizing that they are making "a joyful noise unto the Lord."¹⁹ Shahn atypically positioned himself below the stage. The worm's eye view crops out the hustle of the city. The angle valorizes the singers and the absence of any peripheral distractions creates an aura of seriousness about their mission.

In two photographs made across the street from the main event, men and women gather outside of local stores to watch

¹⁸Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 119.

¹⁹Psalm 100, verse 1, *Holy Bible* King James Version (Chicago: The John A. Hertel Co., 1948), p. 660.

Regarding singers Shahn said, "... my own observation of singers, my own experience with them, has given me an entirely different emotional attitude toward them. Song, I observe, does not issue from an untroubled face; quite the contrary, the beautiful sounds, the subtleties and delicacies; the minors, the accidentals, all require an intense concentration on the part of the singer. That concentration produces a facial expression nearing agony." "How an Artist Looks at Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (September 1954), p. 51, also reprinted in Bernarda Bryson Shahn, *Ben Shahn* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1972), p. 53 and Frances Pohl, *Ben Shahn* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993), p. 104.

the revival dispassionately (Figs. 96 and 97). White men and women sit on the stoop in front of a store. The backdrop of the store determines the depth of field. Figures spread across the picture plane in a manner seen in the photograph that Shahn made in Scotts Run, West Virginia (Fig. 86) that eventually became the source material for his 1939 painting *WPA Sunday Morning*.

In the other photograph black men stand in front of a glass window that reflects the trellised bridge that runs behind the make-shift stage (Fig. 97). The men are present but not engaged in the revival, in a fashion similar to Shahn's self portrait in *Myself Among Churchgoers*.²⁰

²⁰Above and behind the head of one of the men is an advertisement for General Electric light bulbs which reads "Mazda Lamps." In Zoroastrianism *Mazdah* or Ahura-Mazda was the maker of heaven and earth, creator of all things, whose goodness was rivaled by Anro Mainyus (also called Ahraman). These two primal spirits embody opposing forces or dualism present in western religion -- good and evil, God and the Devil, light and darkness. There is no way to know if Shahn made a conscious decision to include this remote allusion to the spiritual light of Mazda, the God figure. But it is certain that in the South ties to the binary absolutes of dualism in Protestant fundamentalism have influenced not only religious belief but also have delineated acceptable codes of behavior and social engagement. Commitment and stability are encouraged; and dissent, the challenging of authority and undisciplined behavior are dissuaded. A rigid code of right and wrong affects the cultural code of the working class and is supported by the ruling classes (capitalist developers) as a means of controlling the rural labor force. An acceptance of binary absolutes is woven through the fabric of southern conservative thinking. Belief systems at ease with the dialectical which resist closure and support consensus through debate are less popular in the South. The absence of dissent has fostered conservative politics and limited social reform, especially in matters of race relations. For example, during a heated debate in 1976 over the use of

When Shahn arrived in Tennessee, a decade had passed since the famed Scopes Monkey Trial, but the outcome of the trial had altered public opinion very little. In 1925, charges were brought against John T. Scopes for teaching the Darwinian theory of evolution in a public school. The theory of evolution contradicted the creation theory set forth in the Old Testament. The trial with defense attorney Clarence Darrow and prosecutor, William Jennings Bryan, attracted national attention. The great offense of the theory of evolution in Tennessee was that it threatened the foundation of white supremacy by shattering the concept of the savage ideal and fostering equality. Condoning it would surely lead to "Communism," mixed marriages and the "devolution" of the white race.²¹

liberal textbooks in the public schools in Kanawha County, West Virginia, one protester said that adopting the controversial textbooks was "an insidious attempt to replace our periods with their questions marks." Even among some Blacks, Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver were looked upon with some skepticism. Ann L. Page and Donald A. Clelland, "The Kanawha County Textbook Controversy: A Study of the Politics of Life Style Concerns," *Social Forces* 57, no. 1 (1978), p. 273 and Billings and Goldman, in Batteau, *Appalachia and America*, p. 71.

²¹Robin D.G. Kelley has pointed out that it was widely believed that black men were drawn to the Communist party because it offered access to the dominant culture's "greatest treasure", "white women." In his critical account of Southern culture, W.J. Cash noted that the word communism was pronounced commune-ism by many Southerners implying a nineteenth-century utopian communal society where "free love" and interracial marriage were condoned. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 79 and Cash, pp. 330-333 and 338.

Blacks and whites worshiped the same God but in segregated churches. Similarly, revivals generally were conducted for separate congregations. Shahn was in New Orleans, Louisiana in October of 1935. There he documented evidence of another revival meeting noted on the chalk board. An African-American man sits on a stoop beside a hand-written sign declaring, "...of our Beloved Pastor Rev J. Poindexter Beginning Monday night, Oct 21th [sic] Ending Monday night Oct 28, 1935 Services Begin each night 7:30 p.m" (Fig. 99). The lone male sits compressed into a shallow plane where architectural elements organize the visual space. Bricks laid on the sidewalk create a limited depth of field while flat horizontal and vertical boards operate like Renaissance structural elements directing the viewer's attention first to the seated figure and then to the notice of the coming week's revival meeting.

Shahn's friends and colleagues Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam collected and noted some of their observations of Black religious practices in their book *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). Wright, a Communist and African-American, fundamentally distrusted the Church; however, he believed that it gave Blacks hope and offered a weekly escape.

It is only when we are within the walls of our churches that we are wholly ourselves, that we keep alive a sense of our personalities in relation to the total world in which we live, that we maintain a quiet and constant

communion with all that is deepest in us.²²

Religion, especially Christianity, has been both a retreat from and source of racial discrimination. In 1906, the African-American scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois said,

If, then, we are to study the history of religion in the South, we must first of all divest ourselves of prejudice, pro or con; we must try to put ourselves in the place of those who are seeking to read the riddle of life and grant to them about the same general charity and the same general desire to do right that we find in the average human being. On the other hand, we must not, in striving to be charitable, be false to truth and right.²³

Du Bois continues with a discussion of the ways the institution of slavery and then segregation were justified by Christians. Theoretically, slavery was presented as an act of humanity for heathens were brought into the Christian world and given a "passport into the kingdom of God." After the end of the Civil War, Du Bois noted

A new adjustment of ethics and religion had to be made to meet this new situation, and in the adjustment no matter what might be said or thought, the Negro and slavery had to be the central thing.

In the adjustment of religion and ethics that was made for the new slavery, under the cotton kingdom,

²²Puckett, p. 72 and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), pp. 130-31.

²³W.E.B. Du Bois, "Religion in the South," in Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois *The Negro in the South* (New York: University Books Title, 1970), pp. 126-127.

there was in the first place a distinct denial of human brotherhood. These black men were not men in the sense that white men were men. They were different--different in kind, different in origin; they had different diseases; they had different feelings; they were not to be treated the same; they were not looked upon as the same; they were altogether apart and, while perhaps they had certain low sensibilities and aspirations, yet so far as this world is concerned, there could be with them neither human nor spiritual brotherhood.²⁴

After the war when slavery no longer served as the institution for segregating blacks from whites, new social and political codes developed. Blacks were expunged from white churches.²⁵ Some parishioners started black congregations of predominately white denominations such as the Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church, but most blacks joined one of the black denominations founded in the North or earlier by free blacks living in the South: African Methodist Episcopal Church

²⁴Ibid, pp. 168-169.

²⁵Based on statistics gathered for his book, *Rope and Faggot*, Walter White, Assistant Secretary of the NAACP and crusader for an anti-lynching law, proved that according to a 1927 census the number of lynchings increased dramatically in states where there was a high percentage of Methodists and Baptists in the total church population. *Rope and Faggot* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), pp. 248-249.

White wrote, "In the United States Protestantism has swung far away from the teachings of tolerance and human brotherhood preached by Jesus ... Not only did the Church, by adroit sophistry, dodge the issue of human bondage, but theologians actually utilized the Bible and teachings of Jesus Christ in defence of the system, and thus committed the Church to a course and a point of view on the question of race and color which ever since have afflicted it." Ibid., p. 44.

(A.M.E.), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.), Church of God in Christ, United Holiness Church or the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. The black religious tradition has been central not only in spiritual matters but also in the development of black culture and identity.²⁶

In Little Rock, Arkansas, Shahn made a series of photographs on a Sunday morning in front of a black church (Fig. 99-101). The building is a modest wooden structure with simple four-over-four, double hung windows. The facade is symmetrically balanced. There is no portico. Parishioners greet one another after services. It was not at all uncommon for members of the congregation to spend most of Sunday at the church. As a proscribed day of rest, Christians were not supposed to labor in the fields or do housework on the Sabbath. For many people, the only fellowship that extended beyond the immediate family was church-sponsored activity: Sunday school, prayer meetings, weddings, funerals, church suppers, picnics and soft-ball games.

When Walker Evans went to South Carolina in 1936, he made several photographs of wooden churches similar to the one Shahn photographed in Little Rock. According to Alan Trachtenburg in these pictures and others as well Evans was

²⁶C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 10-11, 92.

less a social critic than a disinterested observer.²⁷ Two years earlier on his way back from Florida, Evans had stopped in South Carolina to visit Julia Peterkin, the Pulitzer Prize winning author. He returned in 1936 to photograph the frame churches that he had admired previously for their preindustrial simplicity and handmade beauty.²⁸ In 1938 Evans' pictures were so connected to the popular vision of America that Carl Van Vechten claimed, "If everything in American civilization were destroyed except Walker Evans' photographs, they could tell us a good deal about American life."²⁹

Looking at two of Evans' photographs, *Wooden Church, South Carolina*, 1936 (Fig. 102) and *Negro Church, South Carolina*, 1936 (Fig. 103), we see how style and technique structure viewer response. Evans takes a frontal view of the hand-built churches. As in his earlier photographs of Victorian architecture, sharp focus evokes a clarity of a straight-forward vernacular; in the South Carolina churches

²⁷Alan Trachtenberg. *Reading American Photographs: Images as History Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 246.

²⁸Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans, A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), p. 90.

²⁹Carl Van Vechten, "Born to Use a Lens," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, October 16, 1938, quoted in Alan Trachtenberg, "Walker Evans' America: A Documentary Invention," *Observations, Essays on Documentary Photography* (Carmel, California: The Friends of Photography, 1984), p. 56; and Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 246.

columns and pediments are functional not ornamental. The aesthetic focus of this picture is deflected by neither human activity nor superfluity. Noting how the artist's deliberation controls the eventual reception of the image, Alan Trachtenberg said,

[T]he literal point of view of a photograph, where the camera stands during the making of the photograph can be so treated in an extended sequence or discourse as to become an intentional vehicle or embodiment of a cumulative point of view, a perspective of mind, or imagination or moral judgment ... for the image cannot be separated from the perspective in which it is seen. Where the camera stands is usually unambiguous, a precise and particular place. The image is its own point of view -- a simple but often neglected truth. To state the obvious: photographs transcribe, not "reality," but the world as it was seen and recorded. A photographer has no need to persuade a viewer to adopt his or her point of view, because the reader has no choice; in the picture we see the world from the angle of the camera's partial vision, from the position it had at the moment of the release of the shutter.³⁰

The extent to which the artist's, in this case, Walker Evans' intention informs the construction of the documentary meaning, Trachtenberg concludes,

The documentary mode, of exact reproduction for the sake of conveying the look of things, is only a means here; the end is the making of a fictive world, an America of the imagination: a documentary invention.³¹

³⁰Trachtenberg. *Reading American Photographs*, pp. 250, 251-252.

³¹Trachtenberg, "Walker Evans' America: A Documentary Invention," in *Observations, Essays on Documentary Photography*, p. 66.

In the handling of similar subject matter, the contrast between a social photographer such as Shahn and an art photographer, or perhaps even, the art photographer of the Great Depression, Walker Evans, crystallizes. Both artists disparaged pictorialism and the sort of sentimentality that it suggested. As photographers of rural churches Evans practices a more aloof and aesthetic approach while Shahn opts to emphasize the human aspects.

Margaret Olin harshly characterizes Evans as an arbiter of aesthetic truth, inherently classicist and morally compromised. She posits a moral predicament intrinsic to Evans' photographs, "... they pertain to a specific strain of twentieth-century modernism, much of it dealing with architectural theory ...these modernist tenets, when carried to an extreme, yield conditions of striking beauty when beheld and unlivable poverty when inhabited."³² In Evans defense, it should be noted that although his photographs rarely transcend the tenets of straight formalism, he cared deeply for rural southerners, especially those he met and lived with in Hale County, Alabama.³³

Evans wrote that with photography, "Suddenly there is a

³²Margaret Olin, "'It is not going to be easy to look into their eyes' Privilege of Perception in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Art History*, Vol. 14, no. 1 (March 1991), pp. 92-115.

³³Interview with William Christenberry, June 8, 1995 and Rathbone, pp. 123-141 and 295.

difference between a quaint evocation of the past and an open window looking straight down a stack of decades." Evans experimented with different equipment and different strategies. He said that in photography the element of time was introduced into the making of images. The camera opened a new world of chance, disarray, wonder and experiment.³⁴ Yet, during his tenure with the RA/FSA, Evans more frequently aimed for measured exactitude. On the other hand, because of the immediacy of his method, Shahn is an heir to surrealist automatism, the spontaneity of what drives the unconscious, and the swift chance for reflection.³⁵ In this regard, Shahn more closely approximates Evans' estimation of the medium's potential than Evans did himself. Clearly, in retrospect Evans' photographs, especially those made in Hale County, Alabama, are the better known and have contributed more to a collective notion of the fetishized South. Shahn, conversely, sensed the peculiar *ethos* and *pathos* that drives its people and sustains them during the worst of times.

In previous chapters I have discussed the nearly feudal, paternalistic system that controlled the lives of coal miners and tenant farmers. Powerful southern politicians also

³⁴Walker Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," in *Classic Essays in Photography*, Alan Trachtenberg, ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Leete's Island Books, 1980), p. 185, (reprinted from *Hound and Horn*, Vol. 5, no. 1, 1931).

³⁵For a discussion of the optical unconscious see Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays in Photography*, pp. 199-216.

fashioned their personae on the authoritarian male model. During the 1930s, patriarchal figures such as Senator Joseph Robinson of Arkansas and Huey P. Long, Jr., of Louisiana rose to positions of near omnipotence. Robinson operated within the hierarchy of the Democratic party, but Long was a wild card who set his own course.

To his enemies, Long was dangerous and corrupt, but to the poor and disenfranchised, he was a populist savior. From the Railroad Commission, to the Governorship, to the U.S. Senate, Huey Long fought the large oil companies and other utilities which were ignoring the needs of the "little man." He built roads and bridges, provided school books and created a political machinery unprecedented in Louisiana history.³⁶

Senator Long was but one of three grass-roots politicians who were at odds with the Roosevelt administration and were potential Presidential challengers in

³⁶Louisiana is an anomaly in the South; the reasons for this are a complex combination of climate, geography, religion and politics. The humid sub-tropical climate is ideal for the cultivation of rice and sugar cane. The low lying marshes are more suitable to trapping than farming. As the primary port linking the Midwest and South to trade routes to South America, Europe and the East, New Orleans was more exposed to influences from the outside. As the stronghold of wealth and power, New Orleans dominated Louisiana politics until the late 1920s. French, Spanish and Italian settlers along the delta were Roman Catholic, making Louisiana the only state south of Maryland with a large Roman Catholic population. African and Caribbean cultures brought the mystical practice of Voodoo to the already exotic mix of cultures. Upstate, however, the story of Louisiana is quite different. There poor whites, mostly Anglo-Saxons, were Protestants.

the 1936 election. In California, Dr. Francis Townsend was the leading proponent of an Old Age Revolving Pension, and in Detroit, a Catholic priest, Father Charles Coughlin, who began delivering his sermons on the radio after the Ku Klux Klan burned his parish church, turned his attention to the suffering brought on by widespread unemployment.³⁷

In an address given on March 4, 1935, General Hugh S. Johnson, former director of the National Recovery Administration and devoted ally of Roosevelt, said of Long and Coughlin:

They speak with nothing of learning, knowledge nor experience to lead us through a labyrinth that has perplexed the minds of men since the beginning of time. These two men are raging up and down this land preaching not construction but destruction -- not reform but revolution. You can laugh at Father Coughlin, you can snort at Huey Long -- but this country was never under a greater menace.³⁸

Huey Long's controversial plan to "Share Our Wealth" disturbed Wall Street investors as well as traditional democrats. Whatever motivation elevated him to national

³⁷Alan Brinkley, *Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), pp. 82-93.

³⁸Johnson's attack set off a national controversy and drew media attention to the growing swell of malcontents headed by these two charismatic protestors. Father Coughlin was never as popular in Louisiana as his Catholicism might have suggested. Indeed, eventually Coughlin's preaching turned Fascistic and caused his self-destruction. After the Society Security Act was passed, Townsend's old age pension no longer seemed necessary. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

prominence, his commitment to the underclass was relentless, and whether he was right or wrong, he tried to initiate programs to aid his constituency.

In 1931, two years before the AAA initiated acreage reduction, particularly high yields in cotton production threatened to glut the market. Long, cognizant of the potential for economic ruin, proposed a "cotton holiday." On September 27, Mississippi Governor Theodore G. Bilbo called from a special session of the state legislature to consider a legislated reduction of cotton acreage. By October 31, an agreement had been negotiated whereby the state's cotton farmers would decrease acreage for the next three years. The success of these efforts depended upon the cooperation of all cotton-producing states and because Texas was the largest producer, her participation was essential. Texas never lined up with the supporters of reduction and eventually the plan failed.³⁹ Cotton prices dropped to an all-time low, but Long's popularity soared, and in the opinion of many he was elevated beyond human stature. Eventually his suggestions were modified and incorporated into federal policy. Huey Long so dominated the imagination of his followers and Louisiana state politics that his popularity was never challenged in a substantive way. During his lifetime, he

³⁹Robert D. Snyder, *Cotton Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 115-126.

ruled as no other politician ever had.⁴⁰ In March 1935, a reporter for the St. Louis, *Post-Dispatch* wrote of Long and his followers, "They do not merely vote for him, they worship the ground he walks on. He is part of their religion."⁴¹

When Shahn crossed the Mason-Dixon line, he entered a world where the church was the principle societal force, where economic structure relied upon the humility of Christian servants, where a rationalization for segregation was found in the Bible, where the hierarchies of patriarchy and paternalism were deemed the will of God.

In the decade between of the Scopes Monkey trial and the time that Shahn arrived in Tennessee, the Southern Baptist church had become the fastest growing denomination in the United States. What caused this "awakening" was probably not the outpouring of heavenly spirit but the fact that during difficult times people want their religion to be "sufficiently potent, vivid, and compelling so that it can offer them rewards of great magnitude ... capable of miracles...impart[ing] order and sanity to the human condition."⁴²

⁴⁰On September 8, 1935, the flamboyant and charismatic Long was shot by a young doctor named Carl Weiss in the corridors of the Baton Rouge Capitol he had built. He died two days later. Brinkley, pp. 249-250 and 263.

⁴¹Brinkley, pp. 37-42, 29.

⁴²Finke and Stark, pp, 147, 87 and 275.

In 1926 the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution stating, "This Convention accepts Genesis as teaching that man was the special creation of God, and rejects every theory, evolutionary or other, which teaches that man originated or came by way of lower animal ancestry." At first, the resolution seemed a complete victory for fundamentalism, but many delegates refused to sign it, leaving the issue a point of contention between members and the Convention for decades.⁴³

Genesis and the other books of the Old Testament laid the foundation for Judeo-Christian belief. By 1935, Shahn had rejected orthodox Judaism. Still the lessons of the prophets stayed with him. His explorations of Marxism and communism also contributed to his understanding of an economic system built upon the subjugation of a large labor force. Traveling among the churchgoers in the South, Shahn recorded their world as he saw it, sometimes critically, sometimes with humor, but never in manner that was exploitative, invasive or disinterested.

⁴³Ibid., p. 187.

CHAPTER FIVE

Old Times on the Mississippi

*Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens,
repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it
thinks.*

Roland Barthes¹

The American South has been defined at times by its geographical boundaries, warm climate and conservative politics, but its complex identity owes at least as much to its history, mythology and the psychological ramifications of defeat, guilt and deprivation. These factors have found regular and sustained expression in the arts, in photography no less than music, literature or film.² Photography's potential for "fixing" the past parallels the roles of loss and attachment to the past that pervade southern culture.

As Ben Shahn observed and recorded throughout his trip, the South, especially as it existed in 1935, was both tied to

¹Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* trans. by Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1981), p. 38.

²For an overview of southern photographers see M.L. Tucker, "Photography and photographers," in C.R. Wilson and W. Ferris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 94-100. See also "New South Photography: Between myth and reality," *Aperture* no. 150 (Summer 1989) and "The American South," Robert E. Snyder, ed., *History of Photography* (Spring 1995).

and torn apart by its own history. For the final phase of his 1935 trip, Shahn followed the flow of the Mississippi River, south from Memphis, Tennessee, from the source of the blues to New Orleans, Louisiana, the home of jazz. The Mississippi River is a vital navigable artery which through its tributaries brings manufactured goods, raw materials and natural resources from as far east as New York and as far west as Montana to the port of New Orleans and on to the world's markets. The river which divides the East from the frontier cuts through the geographical center and fictionalized heart of the South. Meandering along the banks of the great river, Shahn made photographs in the port cities documenting deck hands, dock workers, merchants, tailors, strawberry pickers, trappers, Cajuns and Creoles. In this chapter I examine the structure of southern melancholia, its link to death, loss, and the rhetoric of the past. I consider how these ideas are manifested in some of the photographs Shahn made along the Mississippi River.³

The turning point in the history of the South was not brought on by the Civil War nor Reconstruction but the influx of financial aid and services such as electricity provided by

³I found Gail Mortimer's critical study of William Faulkner's fiction helpful in formulating my ideas concerning the role of loss in southern identity and its relationship to the way photography is protected against its own loss because it fits into the psycho-social operation of preserving a past presence. Gail L. Mortimer, *Faulkner's Rhetoric of Loss, A Study in Perception and Meaning* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), pp. 5-7.

the New Deal. C. Vann Woodward claims that the South has not been an equal partner in the American dream. It differs from the rest of the nation because of its long and quite "un-American experience with poverty." He writes,

This striking differential was no temporary misfortune of the great depression but a continuous and conspicuous feature of Southern experience since the early years of the Civil War. During the last half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, when technology was multiplying American abundance with unprecedented rapidity, the South lagged far behind.

The Southern heritage of scarcity and its associative components of frustration, failure and defeat leave it exempt from the national rhetoric of "self admiration." The South remained basically pessimistic, aware of the somber realities of hardship, defeat and evil and in possession of a "human heart in conflict with itself."⁴

While living and working in the South, it became clear to Shahn that the region was characterized more by diversity and contradiction than homogeneity. He marveled at local eccentricities, gothic unpredictability and good humor in the face of adversity.⁵ The origins of Southern melancholia and psychic clinging to things that never existed have been linked by some to the ruins of the Civil War and the

⁴C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), pp. 16-24.

⁵Bernarda Bryson Shahn, *Ben Shahn* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), p. 134.

resulting desire to recover lost glory, real or imagined.

During the Civil War, the first decisive operations were in the Western theater where the Union army, trying to secure control of the Mississippi River, moved South from Kentucky and north from the Gulf of Mexico. By April of 1862, the Federals held New Orleans, the banking center and largest port of the Confederacy. Pushing South from Kentucky, General Ulysses S. Grant aimed to sever the Southern flanks. After a slim victory at the Battle of Shiloh, Grant held western Tennessee, advancing only slowly toward Memphis. By early 1863, Grant began driving toward Vicksburg, the Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi. He camped along the Louisiana side of the Mississippi River, holding his position throughout the spring until a major and decisive battle was waged at Vicksburg, Mississippi. After a siege that lasted six weeks, the Confederate commander John C. Pemberton surrendered on July 4, 1863. The Confederacy was split in two. The war continued until 1865 until one-by-one the Confederate commanders surrendered: Lee to Grant at Appomattox, Joe Johnston to Sherman in North Carolina and Richard Taylor in Alabama and Mississippi. On May 26, Commander Edmund Kirby Smith surrendered the Trans-Mississippi army at Shreveport, Louisiana. The war was over.⁶

⁶T. Harry Williams, Richard N. Current and Frank Freidel, *A History of the United States to 1876* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 624, 634, 644-645.

After the Civil War the South was devastated by the loss of family, loved ones, fortunes, expectations, and political, social, and economic power. During the Great Depression because of a real loss of material wealth and imagined expectations for the future, a similar psychic tension existed on a national scale. The medium of photography is particularly well suited to the rhetoric of loss, even though paradoxically photography is protected against its own loss because it preserves a moment from the past, a past "presence."

Christian Metz links this characteristic of photography, that it records a specific, non-recoverable moment, to the ultimate loss, death. The moment captured in a photograph becomes increasingly remote as we each draw closer and closer to our own death. Metz says photography is also associated with death in two other ways. One is the practice of keeping photographs to remember deceased or absent loved ones and the other is that because with a snapshot a subject is abducted in an instant from out of this world and preserved in another world, in another kind of time. Finally, Metz reminds us that photography, like death, is still and silent.⁷

⁷Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Fall 1985), pp. 83-85. Roland Barthes discusses how photography touches death by way of its affinity to theater and theater's relation to the cult of the Dead..."...actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead: ...Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration

All people and all cultures confront the psychological issues surrounding mortality and morbidity. Adjustment and acceptance vary from individual to individual within any culture as well. R.H. Cravens believes that because of a cultural attachment to ancestry and tradition southerners harbor an exaggerated fixation with death,

The Southerner seems driven to confront death on a grander scale: the passing of generations, the loss of elder family members and with them childhood; the demise of cherished tradition; the reclaiming by the earth of all that walk and all that is erected upon it.⁸

A preoccupation with death and loss stems from unresolved conflict. Sigmund Freud writes that the feelings brought on by the loss of a love object can be either conscious or unconscious or both. When nothing about the loss is unconscious, we engage in the mourning process. When the love object is lost, the mourner's object-libido and ego-libido are in conflict. The mourner experiences contradictory feelings, the desire to follow the love object into death and the desire to live. It is by mourning that the individual learns progressively to love the object as absent, whereby the conflict is eventually resolved. In the case of the melancholic, however the conflict continues. For

of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead." *Camera Lucida*, pp. 31-32.

⁸Cravens, R.H. *William Christenberry, Southern Photographs* (New York: An Aperture Book, 1983). p.21.

the melancholic the loss of the love object is unconscious and not subject to the mourning process. The conflict between the drive to death and the desire to live persists, and the adjustment to loss remains unresolved.⁹

A comparable tension exists in the medium of photography especially in the photographs documenting the American scene in the 1930s. From our vantage point the rhetoric of loss surrounds any re-presentation of that era. In this regard the photograph operates as part fetish and part document possessing a mythical truth bound on one end by nostalgia and on the other end by empiricism.¹⁰ I maintain that even in the 1930s photographs made in the South possessed the same psychic tension. To the eyes of urban Americans, images of preindustrial farming, rural simplicity, paddle boats, horse-drawn carriages, even baled cotton suggested a remote bygone era. Rhetorically, these photographs offered a representation of facts while simultaneously triggering memories of another time.

Less than a decade after the Civil War, Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) began work on a series of articles recounting his boyhood memories of growing up on the

⁹Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Sigmund Freud Collected Papers*, Vol. 4, (New York: Basic Books, 1961), pp. 152-170.

¹⁰Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Thinking Photography*, Victor Burgin, ed., (London: MacMillan Education, Ltd, 1982), p. 94.

Mississippi. The articles were published in the Atlantic magazine between January and August of 1875 under the title "Old Times on the Mississippi." Later they became the core of Twain's book, *Life on the Mississippi*.¹¹ Twain's recollections of life on the Mississippi were an attempt to recover the non-recoverable past. Lost love objects are kept alive by likenesses constructed in memories, storytelling or recorded words and images. Because the RA/FSA photographs have been widely distributed, they too construct a visual manifestation or "recollection" of thirties America.¹² Both memories and photographs are progressively distant from the moment of origin, separated by the passage of time and the passing of a living presence. Shahn and most of the RA/FSA photographers have died, many of their subjects are gone, and much of what they saw in America has changed or disappeared. What remains of their era is now just as historical and subject to interpretation and revision as are the "old times" that defined the historical South and shaped its mythologized

¹¹Twain, p. vii.

¹²The RA/FSA photographic file is a visual encyclopedia of thirties America. Many of the widely distributed photographs such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, *Nipoma, California* and Arthur Rothstein's *Duststorm, Cimmaron* virtually define the Depression era for the generations of Americans born after World War II.

image.¹³

In 1937, the documentary film producer, Pare Lorentz, said that *Life on the Mississippi* was "still the most accurate book ever written on the subject," thus, pointing out the popular conflation of memory, fact and fiction. During the Great Depression, Lorentz, like Shahn, was employed by the Farm Security Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Under the auspices of the federal government he produced two of the most controversial films of the Depression era, "The Plow That Broke The Plains" and "The River,"¹⁴ the topic of the former being the Dust Bowl and the

¹³Shahn and the other RA/FSA photographers used black and white film most of the time despite the fact that color film was available. Color film and its processing were more expensive. Color printing was unreliable, often garish. In the early years of the RA/FSA photographic project, when the chief objective was to "bring to the great mass of urban people a feeling for the rural problem of the United States," the literal colorlessness of black and white prints was deemed more effective for conveying the desperation. In addition, black and white photography allows the viewer to project more expansive meaning into the image. The rhetoric of black and white photography was consequently a subversive means of eliciting emotional responses from the viewing public and foreclosing the historical narrative. The association of black and white photography with silent film, newsreels, and the pre-color era, in general, contributes to the construction of a rhetorical past. A theoretical premise outlining the rhetoric of images, denoted and connoted visual messages appears in Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," *Image-Music-Text* trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 32-52. See also Sally Stein, "The Rhetoric of the Colorful and Colorless: American Photography and Material Culture Between the Wars," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1991).

¹⁴Pare Lorentz, *The River* (New York: Stackpole Sons, 1937), n.p.

latter which Lorentz referred to as "the biggest story in the world," was the Mississippi River.¹⁵

Lorentz documentary film, "The River," scored by the composer, Virgil Thomson, and dramatically narrated by the former Metropolitan Opera baritone, Thomas Chalmers,¹⁶ addressed important New Deal issues including soil conservation, hydroelectric power, rural electrification, and flood control. The film was intentionally propagandistic, a slant that pleased the Department of Agriculture, Roy Stryker and the Roosevelt Administration. In a similar vein Shahn's photographs were eventually incorporated into the larger body of RA/FSA images distributed for political ends, but they also had much in common with the prosaic and nostalgic memories recounted in fiction.

Memphis, Tennessee, like its namesake on the Nile, is a major port for agricultural products from the rich black soil of the delta. As the largest city between St. Louis, Missouri and New Orleans, Louisiana, it was considered by residents of the surrounding rural communities to be the mecca of urban pleasures and decadence. In William Faulkner's novel, *The Reivers*, three unlikely comrades, Boon Hogganbeck, Ned McCaslin and Lucius Priest steal the latter's grandfather's new automobile and drive to Memphis where they

¹⁵Erik Barnouw, *Documentary A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 118.

¹⁶Barnouw, pp. 118-120.

encounter almost every cliché of depravity and adventure.

When Shahn arrived in Memphis, he photographed riverboats and deck hands (Figs. 104 and 105). Relating his earliest aspiration, Mark Twain recalled,

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steam boatman ... I first wanted to be a cabin-boy, so that I could come out with a white apron on and shake a table-cloth over the side, where all my old comrades could see me; later I thought I would rather be a deck-hand who stood on the end of the stage-plank with the coil of rope in his hand, because he was particularly conspicuous. But these were only day-dreams -- they were too heavenly to be contemplated as real possibilities.¹⁷

Because the river boat is literally the vehicle of adventure and escape, steam boatmen enjoyed greater physical freedom than more earth-bound laborers such as coal miners, sharecroppers or tenant farmers. A high percentage of river boatmen were involved with gambling, prostitution, con games and piracy -- crimes and misdemeanors that in fiction, at least, were more often romanticized than condemned. The deck hand that Shahn photographed worked on a steamboat named the Queen of Dycusburg. Like so many other workers that Shahn photographed in the South his status of blue collar worker is signified by dress and appearance -- his lean physique, overalls, and five-o'clock shadow. In this three-quarter

¹⁷Twain, pp. 29, 31.

view, the deckhand turns his attention to something outside of the picture frame as he lifts his hand to remove a cigarette from his mouth. This pedestrian act glamorizes neither his work nor his lifestyle. It arrests only the privacy of an unglorified moment.

South of Memphis on the Mississippi River is Natchez, Mississippi, a city where shrewd nineteenth-century cotton planters amassed great fortunes and spent their money on lavish homes and sumptuous decorative arts, including chandeliers and gasoliers made by Waterford, Baccarat or Lalique. It was not uncommon for wealthy plantation owners to commission Sevres to design and produce a china pattern exclusively for their plantation. After service for fifty to one hundred had been made, the molds were broken so that the pattern could not be duplicated. Artisans were hired to design unique flatware patterns to be cast in sterling silver. Interior walls and floors were covered with rosewood or mahogany from South America. Hand-painted wallpaper and matching fabrics were imported from England, France or New York.¹⁸

This conspicuous display of wealth was still in tact during the Great Depression, and even today, the city of Natchez courts its antebellum glory through reenactments

¹⁸On a semi-annual basis, the historic homes of Natchez are open for house-tours. Many of these homes are occupied by descendants of the original owners who act as tour guides.

complete with Civil War uniforms and plantation tours. But Shahn, cognizant of another history, was more interested in the poor people of Natchez. He turned his attention to the other side of town with its humble structures inhabited or frequented by the city's African-American population (Figs. 106-110).¹⁹ There he made photographs of how the black population lived.

In these photographs Shahn emphasizes frontality and exteriority. Building facades serve as backdrops and established the depth of field. Action or inaction is compressed into a shallow space between the buildings and the camera lens. In these photographs architecture is a foil for quiet activity. Shahn's typology of building facades suggests comparison to Atget's contemplative studies of 19th-century Paris or Edward Hopper's paintings such as *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930. Shahn seems to approach the still, silent beauty of the simple wooden structures, but he did not photograph buildings without the presence of human intrusion. People animate each scene.

¹⁹The depiction of African-Americans by RA/FSA photographers is discussed at length in Nicholas Alfred Nathanson, "Politics, Culture and the FSA Black Images," (Ph.D. diss. University of Iowa, 1988). For related discussions see *Picturing Us, African American Identity in Photography*, Deborah Willis, ed., (New York: The New Press, 1994); Deborah Willis, *Imagining Families: Images and Voices* (Washington, DC: The National African American Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, 1994); and Thelma Goldin, et. al., *Black Male, Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994).

In one photograph a woman hangs out of a second story window looking at a man walking by (Fig. 106). Over the years the building's foundation has settled causing the horizontal unpainted wooden boards to list slightly downward on the left. Just as in his earlier photographs of boys playing in a vacant lot (Fig. 2) or on the Houston Street handball courts (Fig. 4) people are diminished by the larger world around them.

In Natchez, three black men sit within the frame of the French doors in front of the Elite Cafe (Fig. 107). Painted on the side of the building is an advertizement for Eagle Beer; a large eagle in full wing span hovers over the text. In another photograph two men find resting places outside of a brick building (Fig. 108). One hangs his head forward so that we can see only the top of his hat. In the window of a closed door there is sign that reads "open," but the building seems more abandoned than vibrant. The domestic scene is more grim. A small child stands in front of a simple wooden house, a cat rests on the porch (Fig. 109). A woman sits on her porch (Fig. 110). These simple frame houses are dilapidated, a sign of poverty. These photographs present drab social realities and reinforce an indelible image of black complacency.²⁰

²⁰Shahn has not been alone in his portrayal of black subjectivity. Historically images of blacks, especially those by white photographers, have more often focused upon society's neglect than heroic image of black rebellion or

In front of a local cafe, Shahn stepped back into the street to take a photograph of a white man getting his shoes shined by a black man (Fig. 111). As noted by historian Fon Boardman, "Hundreds of males of all ages, from boys to old men...took up shoeshining -- at a time when fewer people could afford shoeshines even at the cut price of five cents."²¹ Beyond the activity of the shoeshine, there is both literally and philosophically the stratification of race and class. The white man getting his shoes shined is wearing a tie and a hat, signifiers of his elevated social position. He is physically situated above the blacks in the photograph, a metaphor for white supremacy. To the left of center of the image the white proprietor of the Cafe stands behind the screened door, in a space separate from the group of black men and the primary subject of the photograph. A single female figure walks through the scene so quickly that her image is blurred. The black man on the right is set apart from the other blacks by his posture and the signifier of the three-piece suit. The man performing the shoe shine is further set apart from the white man and the other black people by his physical difference. His left leg has been

accomplishments. See Paul A. Rogers, "Hard Core Poverty," in *Picturing Us*, Deborah Willis, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1994), pp. 159-168.

²¹Fon W. Boardman, Jr., *The Thirties: America and the Great Depression* (New York: Henry Z. Walck, Inc., 1967), p. 31.

amputated below the knee. He wears a make-shift prosthesis. Here Shahn tackles potentially emotional material without exploiting or victimizing his subject.²²

The accumulated wealth of Natchez was derived from the production of cotton; and, of course, that wealth was concentrated in the hands of a select and empowered minority. Nestled in the most fertile region of the Mississippi delta, the plantations in the area produced high yields and enormous profits from cotton. In 1862, the boll weevil crossed the Rio Grande River from Mexico. Despite the use of pesticides, the boll weevil virtually devastated the moist regions of the Mississippi delta, but cotton growers in Natchez with ample reserves were able to wait out the worst of the infestation. Natchez had endured the blight of the boll weevil and it survived the Great Depression. Local cotton continued to be funnelled through the port of Natchez. In an unusual view taken from behind the action, Shahn dramatizes a scene where workers on a loading dock transport bails of ginned cotton to riverboats that will take it to brokers in New Orleans (Fig. 112). This perspective emphasizes the banal and repetitive routine of anonymous labor. Faceless, these workers are as interchangeable as the identical bales of cotton.

Leaving Natchez, Shahn drove south along the Mississippi

²²For a discussion of "victim" photography see Martha Rosler, "in, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," *The Contest of Meaning*, Richard Bolton, ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), pp. 303-341.

to the town of Amite, Louisiana. He stopped there sometime in the early fall of 1935. Precise dating of Shahn's RA/FSA photographs is impossible because his papers do not include details of his photographic journeys and the Information Division developed large numbers of rolls of film simultaneously. Inscriptions on the verso side of vintage photographs occasionally include hand-written notes by Bernarda Bryson Shahn, but these notes are imprecise. In a photograph made in Amite (Fig. 113), two men with their backs to the camera are talking near a parked truck. One holds a printed flyer behind his back. Its headline reads "the Long--Allen Ticket for Governor." The faces of both men are obscured as is the face illustrated on the front of the paper. The paper has no identifying masthead, no date. We know the Long/Allen ticket ceased to exist after the assassination of Huey Long in September of 1935. The character of Huey Long embodied equal parts of myth and reality, paternalism and moral depravity. When Long died, his dreams that included the redistribution of wealth folded, but the protracted shadow of his political influence persisted.²³ In Louisiana Oscar K. Allen, his long-time ally

²³Throughout the spring and summer of 1935, Long had become immensely popular, primarily because of his plan to "Share Our Wealth." Although not particularly well conceived, his plan was rhetorically appealing to many who witnessed that the upper five percent of the American population lived in luxury while the rest of the nation especially the bottom half languished in poverty. By autumn of 1935, Long was a threat to democratic party insiders and

and the incumbent planned to run again for governor, but "O.K." Allen died before the 1936 election and Richard Leche ran successfully in his stead. Long's brother Earl was elected lieutenant governor.²⁴ The photograph's capacity for narrative resides in the intriguing links to that era, the vintage cars, the partial photograph of Long and six words of text.

Hand written lettering in an Amite grocer's window (Fig. 114) lists the prices of staples in Louisiana in 1935. Five pounds of sugar cost 24 1/2 cents, five pounds of rice were 24 cents, and the sale price for twenty four pounds of flour was 87 cents. When the young Shahn was apprenticed to a lithographer's shop, he spent days learning to form each letter and determine the precise amount of space between each one, just enough so that an imaginary drop of water, no more and no less, could flow into every curve and open space. Shahn later described the "elegance and austere dignity" of the Roman alphabet and his pleasure in discovering "the wonderful interrelationship, the rhythm of line as letter moves into letter."²⁵ The signs occupy the left half of the

organizers who feared Long might run as a third party spoiler against Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential campaign. Alan Brinkley, *Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), pp. 249-250.

²⁴Brinkley, p. 263.

²⁵Frances Pohl, *Ben Shahn, with Ben Shahn's Writings* (San Francisco, California: Pomegranate Art Books, 1993), p. 9.

photograph.

Three men appear in the right half of the photograph. They stand one behind the other in the darkened doorway adjacent to the advertized specials. The first, a middle-class businessman dressed in a suit and tie, clutches a cigar in his mouth and looks forward. He could be the proprietor or a customer. Behind him a second man wearing sunglasses directs his attention to something or someone outside of the picture plane and the third figure loiters in the recessed shadows. It is the curious presence of the third man and his suspicious expression that give mystery to the photograph.

In New Orleans Shahn pursued those urban topics that had fascinated him years earlier in New York: merchants, street scenes, people on a park bench. His photograph of an African-American tailor depicts a humble tradesman seated at a sewing table behind a half-screened door. The figure is centered in the image, framed by the edges of the door jam (Fig. 115). The open mesh of the screen, which allows air to circulate through the tailor's shop and formally establishes the front perimeter of the photograph, articulates the physical boundary between Shahn and the tailor and alludes to the boundary that separates their worlds.

In Jackson Square Shahn photographed two middle-class white people sitting on a public bench (Fig. 116). Both wear spectacles and look straight ahead. This casual New Orleans scene recalls an earlier Shahn photograph made in Washington

Square Park, New York (Fig. 117). Urban architecture defines the background for these pedestrian group portraits. The sitters demonstrate a lack of self-consciousness, in part, because they were probably unaware they were being photographed. Inspired by the straight photography of Paul Strand, Shahn aimed for candor and achieved it.

At the river's edge, Shahn documented a dock workers' strike. Management ignored the demands of the workers and hired "scabs" in their place. With so many people hungry and out of work, picket lines were little deterrent. In a photograph Shahn made at the Toulouse Street Wharf, "scabs" gather to fill the vacant positions (Fig. 118). Unemployed applicants for jobs waited outside of the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (Fig. 119 and 120). Standing or sitting, these down and nearly out people, who like coal miners, sharecroppers or tenant farmers needed money to live, waited, hoping to find work, hoping the Depression would end soon.

Shahn's next stop along the Mississippi River was Plaquemines Parish in rural Louisiana. Because of climate and terrain, the low country of southern Louisiana is suitable for growing sugar cane and rice, fishing and trapping. Trappers lived on the indigenous wildlife, otters, muskrats, possums, wild boars, alligators. There was always plenty of seafood. Shahn photographed proud trappers who "wouldn't touch the soil" (Fig. 121). It was so beneath them to work the land that they would "stamp out anything green

because their whole dignity rested on trapping, not on soil."²⁶ A trapper lived by his own wits and was not beholding to a landlord, a small degree of independence that enhanced the trapper's sense of personal dignity and freedom. In this photograph a trapper lounges on his front porch with his daughter, a pack of cigarettes, matches and a tin can. Framed in the narrow space of the joint of the porch and the side of the house, they both look up at the camera querulously.

In the home of a Louisiana tenant farmer Shahn made a photograph of an appealing young child sitting on the edge of a bed. Behind him the wall is papered with newspaper comic strips (Fig. 122). These pictures within the picture illustrate a serene and heroic pride in trying to mask and beautify the dilapidated walls. Shahn claimed that what he tried to shoot was "the ordinary in an extraordinary manner;" he saw what he was trying to do as extraordinary only in the sense that it was something that was rarely done with deliberation.²⁷

Along a levee in Plaquemines Parish, Shahn photographed a group of workers pushing wheelbarrows to some unknowable destination (Fig. 123). The succession of workers stream

²⁶Interview Richard Doud with Ben Shahn, 14 April 1964. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁷"Photos for Art," *U.S. Camera*, Vol. 9, no. 4, May 1946, p. 30.

diagonally from left to right across the picture plane. Their wheelbarrows are empty suggesting that the contents were deposited on the ridge above, and that the workers now are returning to the source for another load. Levees on the Mississippi were often rebuilt to assure protection from high water. On the ridge above the workers are three men, one in a suit, two in light colored clothing. These three men and another standing in the bulrushes supervise the laborers.

By late October sugar cane is ready for harvest. In a photograph made in a sugar cane field, a lone worker stands surrounded by the leggy plants, a metaphor for how agriculture in general and agribusiness in particular subsume labor (Fig. 124). Shahn's photograph could have been made during any harvest season in Louisiana. It is not locked into the year 1935 by subject or details. Nothing in the photograph distinguishes it from the current season. What is disturbing about Shahn's photograph is not that it records a moment never to be repeated but that it does not.

Shahn's photograph of three Creole girls from Plaquemines Parish documents a moment of leisure. One of the girls plays a ukelele. She and a second girl seem to be singing, at least their lips are pursed with half smiles that suggest pleasure (Fig. 125). The Creole people themselves as well as their music and cuisine are a mixture of components from various cultures, African, French, English and Spanish. The photograph is generally one of a festive moment even

though the third girl's expression disrupts the general message of the image. She appears detached, pensive. She seems preoccupied and disengaged from her friends and from those who in looking at the photograph, look at her. She is in another place, more personal, less public.

Further down the Mississippi, Shahn arrived at Point a la Hache, a small community located between the River and Breton Sound. In a cemetery in Point a la Hache, Shahn photographed the mausoleums, cemetery workers and a Parish priest (Figs. 126-128). Like Pere-Lachaise, the Paris cemetery named for a seventeenth-century Jesuit priest, the cemetery at Point a la Hache is a labyrinth of marble markers.

Marveling his first impression of a Louisiana cemetery, Mark Twain recounted,

They bury their dead in vaults, above ground. These vaults have a resemblance to houses -- sometimes to temples; are built of marble, generally; are architecturally graceful and shapely; they face the walks and driveways of the cemetery; and when one moves through the midst of a thousand or so of them, and sees their white roofs and gables stretching into the distance on every hand, the phrase 'city of the dead' has all at once a meaning to him.²⁸

In Shahn's photographs a priest pauses before the marker of "Famille Celetin Sarraat" (Fig. 127 and 128). In the side view

²⁸Twain, p. 247.

we see the sorrowful expression on the priest's face, his lowered head. From the rear his clerical collar is no longer visible, he becomes any mourner, every mourner. His broad back, slumped forward slightly conveys the intense, expressive psychological power of a subtle gesture.

Point a la Hache marked the southern most tip of Shahn's trip. The photographs he made in the small towns and cities along the Mississippi River are rarely seen. They record the ordinary events in the lives of ordinary people. What Shahn observed and fixed in the shadows of his photography adds to a long tradition of southern subjectivity. He avoided the cliches surrounding the glory of plantation life, but it was not entirely possible for Shahn to escape the interplay between myth and reality.

From the Civil War photographs by Mathew Brady to the haunting images by Doris Ulmann, Walker Evans and other Depression era photographers to more recent depictions by Danny Lyon, John McWilliams, William Eggleston, William Christenberry, Debbie Fleming Caffery, Nick Nichols and Sally Mann, imagery concerning the South has dealt variously with the tragedy of war, white supremacy, poverty, one-party politics, lethargy, hospitality, provincialism, nostalgia, fantasy, pathology, a sense of place and a sense of the past. Shahn's intentions may have been to document the empirical, but what he recorded was a mythical truth that lies still and silent somewhere between fact and fiction, desire and

distortion.

CONCLUSION

Ben Shahn was motivated to take his first trip to the South by the desire to get some good photographs to be used later as source material for paintings, murals or pamphlets. When Roy Stryker saw Shahn's photographs, he knew these visually forceful photographs were more than mere sketches reserved for the private musing of the artist. He asked Shahn to add them to the rapidly growing Resettlement Administration collection. Like much of the photography produced for the RA/FSA and other similar work that falls under the rubric of documentary or "social" photography, they were to be used as proof, evidence, testimony and in turn persuasion, influence, propaganda. It is certain that Shahn's photography was inflected, usually deliberately. In some instances, his original intentions were surpassed by the effects of chance, an unanticipated detail or a spontaneous gesture caught and frozen in time when the shutter snapped. Reconsidered in the context of his peers, subsequent photography and revisionist theory, Shahn's photography comes across as strikingly fresh and among his most compelling art in any medium.

When Shahn moved to Washington in 1935, he brought with him a sophisticated commitment to social reform and two decades of experience as a professional artist. Also, by then Shahn had formulated a strong aesthetic sensibility

concerning photography derived in part from the lessons he learned making his own photographs on the streets of New York City.¹ His knowledge was enriched by his appreciation for the photography of others including Atget, Brady, Hine, Strand, Cartier-Bresson and Evans. After joining the RA/FSA, Shahn learned to work more quickly, sometimes even from inside a moving automobile. He pushed photography to the visual edge of reportage and to what was, then, new ground for art photography.

Many of Shahn's photographs are composed haphazardly. Others are out of focus. Sometimes his subjects are aligned neither symmetrically nor asymmetrically. Colin Westerbeck and Laura Katzman have suggested that Shahn's reluctance to claim professional status as a photographer was a defense mechanism that allowed him to take risks without compunction.² It is precisely this willingness to risk failure that is the core of his abiding contribution to the history of photography. In his hands a scatter-shot approach produced extraordinary results. His ease with the hand-held camera allowed him to catch the unexpected event or detail that

¹Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, Little, Brown and Co., Inc., 1994), pp. 258-60.

²Colin Westerbeck, "Ben Shahn: Artist as Photography," *Connoisseur* 212 (October 1982), pp. 100-101, and Laura Katzman, "The Politics of Media, Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn," *American Art* (Winter 1993), Vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 68-69.

might have escaped the sketch artist's eye. His photographs tell us much about how people lived, what they wore, the routine of their everyday lives and the tribulations of their jobs. Because many of his subjects were unaware they were being photographed, they are unselfconscious and did not pose for the camera. We see what the New Deal administrators wanted the public to see; moreover, we see how the events and circumstances of peoples lives wear on their bodies and are manifested in their expressions. Shahn was looking for the essential in an image, if the photograph had "what is called composition, then that [was] so much velvet."³

Robert Wagner believes that Shahn's sometimes awkward compositions with overlapping, truncated or decentered figures and his choices of everyday, ordinary subjects anticipate a generation of photographers concerned with the commonplace and uncontrolled life -- Duane Michals, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, for example.⁴ Shahn abandoned the camera in 1938, and he had no real disciples or students. RA/FSA photographers Arthur Rothstein, John Vachon and Jack Delano studied Shahn's work before going into the field to make their own photographs. Helen Levitt said she was impressed with what Shahn was doing, but she was

³"Photos for Art," *U.S. Camera*, Vol. 9, no. 4, May 1946, pp. 30-31.

⁴Robert W. Wagner, ed. *Ben Shahn in Ohio: The Summer of 1938* (Upper Arlington, Ohio: The Cultural Arts Commission, 1988), n.p.

influenced more by Cartier-Bresson. Still, Shahn made thousands of photographs that illustrate Wagner's point. After leaving the FSA, Shahn drifted away from photography, at least its production. He continued to refer to it for the rest of his career.

Margaret Rigg said that it was "important for his subsequent work [that] he took up photography. In later years many of his paintings were to have that classic motion so often seen in the finest photography."⁵ In a review of Shahn's 1947 retrospective, Clement Greenberg celebrated the artist's interest in photography claiming it supplied

the formula which remains responsible for most of the successful pictures he has painted ... the flat, dark, exact silhouette placed upstage against a receding empty, flat plane that is uptilted sharply to close the back of the picture and contradict the indication of deep space.

Consistent with his own formalist perspective, Greenberg conceded Shahn was "more naturally a photographer than painter ... surest of himself when he orients his picture in terms of dark and light." As others have noted, Greenberg's compliments were on his own terms, for his statements deliberately shunt the sociological aspects of Shahn's work.⁶

⁵Margaret Rigg, "Two American Painters," *Motive*, May 1960, p. 19.

⁶Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation*, November 1, 1947, p. 481. Repeated in Frances Pohl, *Ben Shahn, New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), pp. 53-54 and Laura Katzman, "The Politics of

Ben Shahn championed many causes in his lifetime. His enduring commitment to social justice can be traced to his childhood in Russia and the influence of his activist father and grandfather. Shahn's best known work is still his famous gouache series *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1931-32. It was during the 1930s that Shahn's idealism matured and found the greatest institutional support and most popular public acceptance. The hardships of the times led to a shift in class values. The individualism propounded by President Hoover gave way to the idea of shared responsibility promoted by Roosevelt. As noted by Thomas Jefferson, the pendulum of American class consciousness swings between those who "fear the people, and wish to transfer all power to the higher classes of society: and those who "consider the people the safest depository of power and the last resort."⁷ By 1935, the national sentiment was one of cooperation and concern, and the national ambition was to achieve greater equity and justice for those most adversely effected by the Depression. Shahn claimed his work was about people, usually the lower one-third of the people. He was attuned to New Deal objectives, especially those of the RA/FSA. RA/FSA photography which included Shahn's contribution was effective

Media, Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn," *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁷Robert McElvaine. *The Great Depression America, 1929-1941* (New York, Time Books, Inc., 1993), pp. 4-6.

in bringing the dreary lives of the poor and disenfranchised to light. New Deal goals were ambitious not only from the standpoint of solving monumental problems such as rural poverty but also because they attempted to move a nation toward collectivism. Anthony Badger noted that Roosevelt's plans were insufficient for combatting the dilemma "of a permanently poor rural population in the South." Surplus agricultural production continued despite the demand for crop reduction and the payment of price-support subsidies. Direct relief was scattered and insufficient; less than 60 per cent of the unemployed ever obtained work relief. Many of the problems in the rural South were intractable, and recently Roosevelt's alphabet soup has garnered sharp criticism for the bureaucratic quagmire it created. Nevertheless, Resettlement projects and loans made by the RA/FSA reached many who would not have survived the Great Depression without assistance.⁸

In the twentieth century photography has replaced painting and printmaking as the most direct, accessible and democratic means of reaching a mass audience. Given the persuasive effect of the medium and the visual power of his photographs, I maintain that Shahn's photographs communicate political messages even more effectively than either his paintings or graphics. The photographs are formally rich,

⁸Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal, The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), pp. 299, 305.

innovative, dynamic and spontaneous. Above all they speak clearly of Shahn's response to society's neglect. The photographs that he made in the fall of 1935 in the American South are among the most compelling photographs produced during the Great Depression. His concern for the commonplace, attention to the uncontrolled life, rejection of convention and comfort with spontaneity overturn the authority and impact of belabored documentary messages and confirm the power of Shahn's understatement and subtlety.

APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY

1898 Born September 12, Kovno, Lithuania. Father and grandfather were woodcarvers. Mother's family were potters. The family were Socialists. Begins to draw at an early age. Hessel Shahn, Ben's father, was exiled to Siberia, but escaped going first to Africa then America.

1906 Shahn immigrates with his mother and siblings to Brooklyn, New York, to join Hessel.

1911-17+ Employed as a lithographer's apprentice. He probably worked for an uncle by the name of Hessenberg at either 101 Beeckman Street or 63 Cliff Street, New York City. Attends night classes at the Educational Alliance.

1919-22 Attends New York University. Transfers to City College of New York. Leaves college to study at National Academy of Design and Art Students League.

1920 summer Studies at Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Sacco and Vanzetti found guilty of murder

1922 Marries Tillie (Ziporah) Goldstein.

1924 Secures a passport

1925 (March to October) Travels with Tillie to North Africa, Italy, Austria, and France. Settles in Paris, studies French at Sorbonne and art at Academie de la Grande Chaumiere. Scopes "Monkey Trial," Tennessee.

1926 Summers in Truro, Massachusetts

1927 Sacco and Vanzetti executed.

1928 Returns to Paris; witnesses massive demonstrations in protest of the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Spends approximately a year on Island of Djerba, off the North African coast. Toured North Africa, Spain and Italy.

1929 Daughter Judith is born in Paris (July 14). In September or October returned to live on Willow Street, Brooklyn Heights and Truro, Massachusetts. Meets Walker Evans at the home of Dr. Iago Galdson. The two artists share a studio on Bethune Street. Stock market crashes.

1930 First solo exhibition, Downtown Gallery, 113 West 13th Street, New York City (April 8-27). Exhibits 13 gouaches on Dreyfus Affair with photographs by Walker Evans in a neighbor's barn in Truro.

Severe drought in Mississippi and Ohio Valleys and

entire southwest. 4,000,000 unemployed in the United States.

1931 Publishes the Levana portfolio. Exhibits in Eleventh International Watercolor Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago (April 30-May 31). Paints illustrations for the Haggadah. Shahn refers to newspaper photographs and images in Sacco and Vanzetti defense literature to paint series of twenty-three tempera paintings on the famous case.

After a skirmish on a train, nine black youths are arrested and charged with assault and later rape, Scottsboro, Alabama. Huey P. Long elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of Louisiana. Empire State Building opened, New York.

1932 Meets artist-writer Bernarda Bryson. Exhibits Sacco and Vanzetti series at The Downtown Gallery (April 5-17) and again with the Alfred Dreyfus gouaches at The Harvard Society of Contemporary Art (October 17-29). In group exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art (Murals by American Painters and Photographers) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (First Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting). Begins making "street photography."

"Hooverilles" begin to spring up all over the country. 3,000 people participate in the "Hunger March" against the main Ford auto plant, four are killed and fifty wounded. Lindbergh baby kidnapped and murdered. Bonus Army invades Washington, DC. Unemployment hits 13.7 million in the U.S.

First unemployment insurance law enacted in Wisconsin. State of Nevada orders a 12-day bank holiday to save the state's tottering banks.

The College Art Association initiated relief program for artists, Emergency Work Bureau (EWB). The most popular song in the nation was "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" At the National Democratic Convention, the nominee for President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people." The organ played "Happy Days Are Here Again." FDR elected 32nd President. Gandhi arrested in India. Nazis win elections in Prussia, Bavaria, Wutemburg and Hamburg.

1933 Shahn works with Diego Rivera as mural assistant at RCA building, Rockefeller Center and later at New Workers' School on West 14th Street. Exhibits "The Mooney Case" series at Downtown Gallery (May 5-20), with catalog introduction by Diego Rivera. Under aegis of Public Works of Art Project, creates gouache paintings on theme of prohibition as a study for Central Park Casino mural (rejected by Municipal Art Commission). Son Ezra born New York City (November 12).

Franklin Roosevelt inaugurated 32nd President of the United States (March 3). In his inaugural speech he said "This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself --

nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

Roosevelt created his "alphabet" agencies Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Agriculture Adjustment Administration (AAA), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), National Industrial Recovery Administration (NIRA), Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), Works Progress Administration (WPA). Dust storms begin in the Great Plains. The minimum wage was set at 40 cents per hour throughout the U.S. Twenty-first Amendment to the U.S. Constitution repeals prohibition. Public Works Administration (PWA) is created. U.S. goes off the gold standard. American banks closed March 6 - March 9 by Presidential order. Angered by increasing farm foreclosures, Iowa farmers threaten to lynch any insurance company representatives or officials of the law who institute foreclosure proceedings for the duration of the Depression.

In March FDR calls Congress into a special session beginning its "Hundred Days" when many of the principal proposals and policies of the New Deal were enacted. Civilian conservation Corps created to provide occupational training and employment for young men.

Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany (January 30). All school teachers in Germany are ordered to read Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Albert Einstein emigrates from Germany to Princeton, New Jersey. Approximately 60,000 artists,

including Kandinsky and Klee, emigrate from Germany. Starvation in U.S.S.R. reaches disastrous proportions. Japan withdraws from the League of Nations. The first concentration camps are erected by the Nazis in Germany.

1934 Commissioned by Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) with artist, Lou Block, to design murals for Riker's Island Penitentiary. Makes photographs of inmates at Blackwell Island Prison and Warwick Reformatory as a shortcut to sketching. Represented in "Modern Works of Art: Fifth Anniversary Exhibition," Museum of Modern Art, New York (November 20-January 20, 1935).

Father Coughlin begins radio sermons from the Shrine of the Little Flower, Detroit. Huey P. Long announced "Share Our Wealth" plan to redistribute the wealth of millionaires so that every family would have an annual income of \$5,000 per year. Long uses the slogan "Every Man a King." Dr. Francis E. Townsend, a California physician, announces the formation of Old Age Revolving Pensions, Ltd. Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) created, Joseph P. Kennedy appointed Chairman. U.S Federal Farm Mortgage Corporation organized.

John Dillinger shot outside a Chicago movie theater. Later, FBI agents also shot Pretty Boy Floyd and Baby Face Nelson. Hitler declares himself Fuhrer of the Reich. Stalin begin reign of terror in Russia. Hitler and Mussolini meet in

Venice. USSR admitted to the League of Nations. German-Polish non-aggression pact signed.

1935 Studies for Riker's Island mural approved by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and the Commissioner of Corrections but rejected by Municipal Art Commission. Shahn exhibited in "American Painting and Sculpture of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries," Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut (January 29-February 19).

Joined Special Skills staff of Resettlement Administration, Washington DC, under Rexford Guy Tugwell and Adrian Dornbush. Is on "loan" to photographic unit, directed by Roy E. Stryker. Travels through West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana. Rural Electrification Administration established. National Labor Relations Act passed. Social Security Act passed. Works progress (later Projects) Administration (WPA/FAP), the first federal art project devoted to work relief is created. Huey P. Long assassinated. Supreme Court declares parts of the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional.

Germany repudiates military clauses of Versailles Treaty. Italy invades Abyssinia.

The 35 mm Kodachrome film is devised.

1936 Resettlement Administration photographs exhibition at WPA Federal Art Project Gallery, New York (December).

Shahn's painting now strongly influenced by photographs. When FDR was nominated for second term. He said, "To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny." *Life Magazine* begins publication.

1937 Makes photographs for RA/FSA in Tennessee, North Carolina and Alabama. Creates series of gouaches on the history of La Follettes and the growth of the Liberal movement in Wisconsin, submitted in competition for a town hall mural near Milwaukee.

The "Hindenburg" explodes. Joe Louis, the "Brown Bomber," becomes heavyweight boxing champion. The Duke of Windsor marries Wallis Simpson.

1938 Completes fresco mural on theme of immigrant labor in Jersey Homesteads (now Roosevelt, NJ), Community Center. Travels as a photographer for RA/FSA in Ohio. Wins U.S. Treasury Department, Section of Fine Arts commission (with Bernarda Bryson) for murals in Bronx Central Annex Post Office, New York. In group exhibition, "Second Annual Membership Exhibition," American Artists Congress, John Wannamaker Gallery, New York (May 5-21). Son, Jonathan, born Columbus, Ohio (June 15). Tom Mooney freed after having been sentenced to death in the bomb killings at a San Francisco preparedness parade in 1916. Resigns from the Farm Security

Administration (August).

1939 Completes Bronx Post Office murals on Walk Whitman theme, despite opposition from local Church leaders. Receives commission for mural on theme of the Four Freedoms for Post Office in Jamaica, New York. In group exhibition "20th Century Artists: A Selection of Paintings, Sculpture and the Graphic Arts from the Museum's Permanent Collection," Whitney Museum of American Art (September 13-December 4). Moves to Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey.

New York World's Fair. Germany seizes Czechoslovakia. Italy invades Albania. Japan captures Shanghai. Nazi-Soviet treaty signed. Germany invades Poland. Great Britain and France declare war on Germany. End of the Spanish Civil War.

1940 Exhibits "Sunday Paintings" at Julian Levy Gallery, New York (May 7-21). Wins Public Buildings Administration, Section of Fine Arts competition for Social Security Administration building mural, Washington, D.C. In group exhibition, "Loan Exhibition of Mural Designs for Federal Buildings from the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration, Federal Works Agency, Washington, D.C.," The Whitney Museum of American Art (February 27-March 17). Daughter Abby born Jersey Homesteads (July 31).

Unemployment still at 14 percent.

1941 Exhibits in "This Is Our City," Whitney Museum of American Art (March 11-April 13). Makes his first serigraph. Returns to Washington.

Pearl Harbor bombed (December 7).

1942 Completes mural for Social Security building. Works as Senior Liaison Officer, Graphics Division, Office of War Information, making posters, designing pamphlets. Exhibits in "20th Century Portraits," Museum of Modern Art (December 9, 1942-January 24, 1943).

1943 Leaves OWI. Returns to Jersey Homesteads. Exhibits in "American Realists and Magic Realist," Museum of Modern Art (February 10-March 21). Joins Political Action Committee of CIO. Makes the first of "war paintings."

1944 Exhibits in "Modern Drawings," Museum of Modern Art (February 16-May 10); "110 American Painters of Today," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (August 18-September 11); Downtown Gallery (November 14-December 2).

1945 Director, Graphic Arts Division, CIO, designing pamphlets, posters and other graphics. Exhibits "38th Annual Exhibition: American Painting," City Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri (February 10-March 12); "Modern Art in Advertising: An Exhibition of Designs for Container Corporation of

America," Art Institute of Chicago (April 27-June 23).

Franklin Delano Roosevelt dies (April 12). Shahn begins movement to change the name of Jersey Homesteads to Roosevelt, New Jersey.

1946 Exhibits "Watercolor--USA," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (April 24-May 28); "Survey of American Painting," Tate Gallery, London (June-July).

1947 Exhibitions Downtown Gallery (April 1-26); Retrospective sponsored by Arts Council of Great Britain (national tour April-July); "International Watercolor Exhibition: Fourteenth Biennial," The Brooklyn Museum (April 16-June 8). Teaches at Boston Museum Summer School, Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Retrospective exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York (September 30, 1947-January 8, 1948, and national tour). James Thrall Soby's *Ben Shahn* published.

1948 John Bartlow Martin's article "The Blast of Centralia," with Shahn's illustrations is published *Harper's Magazine* (March), later works with Martin again on "The Hickman Story," an account of the Chicago tenement fire (*Harper's Magazine*, September). Works with CIO Political Action Committee, in Henry A. Wallace campaign for Presidency.

Harry S. Truman elected President.

1949 Solo exhibition, Downtown Gallery (October 25–November 12). Group exhibition "Boris Mirski Gallery, Boston (October 26–November 26). Guest lecturer, University of Wisconsin. A *Partridge in a Pear Tree* published. Awarded President's Medal, Art Directors Club.

1950 Exhibits Albright Art School, Buffalo (March 17–April 27); Frank Perls Gallery, Los Angeles; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C. (November 12–December 12); "100 American Painters of the 20th Century," Metropolitan Museum of Art (June 16–October 29). Teaches in summer session, University of Colorado, Boulder.

1951 Exhibitions Downtown Gallery (May 22–June 8); Arts Club of Chicago (October 2–27). Teaches at The Brooklyn Museum School and summer session at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. Seldon Rodman's *Portrait of the Artist as an American* published.

1952 Attends Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Works for Adlai Stevenson Presidential campaign. Solo exhibitions at The Downtown Gallery, New York, Boris Mirski Gallery, Boston; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art (December 5 1952 – January

25, 1953). Awarded Philadelphia Watercolor Society Gold Medal and Alice McFadden Eyre Medal, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

1953 Solo exhibition, Minneapolis Institute of Arts
Represented in "Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors," Museum of Modern Art travelling exhibition.
Participated in Bienal o Museu de Arte Moderna de Sao Paulo, Brasil (December 1953 - February 1954).

1954 Represents United States with Willem de Kooning at XXVII Venice Biennale. Creates *The Alphabet of Creation*. Exhibits at Detroit Institute of Arts (March 9 - April 11) and Museum of Contemporary Arts, Houston. Solo exhibitions at Renaissance Society, University of Chicago; Allyn Art Gallery, University of Southern Illinois, Carbondale and Art Institute of Chicago. Works with Edward R. Murrow on CBS television program (aired January 4, 1955).

1955 Retrospective exhibition, The Downtown Gallery (January 18 - February 12). Group exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Arts, Houston (April 17-May 15). Solo show Galleria Tartaruga, Rome. Travels to Italy. Works with Murrow again on program on Louis Armstrong (aired December 13).

1956 Elected member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and names honorary member of The Signet Society, Harvard University. Receives Joseph E. Temple Medal Award from Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Travels to Europe. Works on Adlai Stevenson's second presidential campaign. Exhibits in group exhibition at XXVIII Venice Biennale. Retrospective exhibition, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University (December 4 1956-January 19, 1957).

1956-57 Teaches at Harvard University as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry.

1957 Completes mosaic for William E. Grady Vocational School, Brooklyn, New York. *The Shape of Content* published by Harvard University Press. Illustrates poetry of John Berryman. "The Graphic Work of Ben Shahn," American Institute of Graphic Arts, New York (March 1-28). "Ben Shahn, a Documentary Exhibition," Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. James Thrall Soby, *Ben Shahn: His Graphic Work* published.

1958 Awarded American Institute of Graphic Arts Gold Medal. Designs sets for Jerome Robbins' ballet, *New York Export--Opus Jazz*. Represented at Brussels Exposition (April 17-October 19). Designs and illustrates Alastair Reids' *Ounce, Dice, Trice*. Exhibits St. Mary's College, Notre Dame,

Indiana and Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

1959 Exhibitions at The Downtown Gallery, New York; Leicester Galleries, London and Katonah Gallery, New York; Galleria dell'Obelisco, Rome. Represented in "The Museum and Its Friends: Eighteen Living American Artists Selected by the Friends of the Whitney Museum (March 5-April 12). Completes drawings for *Hamlet: A Television Script* (CBS). Participates in first cultural exchange exhibition for USIA. Elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

1960 Exhibits at University of Louisville, University of Utah, Jewish Community Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Art Institute of Chicago; Milwaukee Art Center (March 3-April 3); University of Utah; Galleria dell'Obelisco, Rome. Completes mural for Congregation Mishkan Israel, New Haven, Connecticut. Travels to New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and Japan. Makes photographs in Java, Singapore, Hong Kong, Kyoto.

1961 Exhibits "Lucky Dragon" paintings at The Downtown Gallery, New York. Exhibits at Galleria dell'Obelisco, Rome and New Haven Jewish Community Center, Connecticut. Designs sets for e.e. cummings' play, *Him*, and for Jerome Robbins' ballet, *Events*. Awarded Contemporary American Oil Paintings Exhibition Medal by Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC.

1962 Two traveling exhibitions with International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, "The Works of Ben Shahn," and "Ben Shahn: Watercolors, Drawings and Graphics."

Commissioned by Nationalmuseum, Stockholm to paint portrait of Dag Hammarskjold. Complete mosaic mural for LeMoyne College, Memphis. Made posters for Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York and Boston Arts Festival. Awarded honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts, Princeton University.

1963 Completes designs for mosaic murals for S. S. Shalom (acquired by the New Jersey State Museum in 1968). Writes and publishes *Love and Joy About Letters*. *Ben Shahn's America* televised on February 17 (BBC). Exhibits Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire. *Ben Shahn: Paintings* by James Thrall Soby published.

Assassination of John F. Kennedy (November 22).

1964 Exhibits Leicester Galleries, London. Creates mosaic mural for Sydney and Dorothy Spivack, Far Hills, New Jersey. Receives honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati and honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

1965 Creates two stained glass window designs for Temple Beth Zio, Buffalo, New York. Contributes portfolio of three prints (portraits of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, civil-rights workers murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi) for Human Relations council of Great New Haven, Connecticut. Creates deluxe edition of *Ecclesiastes*. *Time* Magazine cover of Martin Luther King (March 19).

1966 Exhibits drawings and watercolors, The Saint Paul Art Center, Minnesota. Also exhibits at Randolph-Macon Women's College; Galleria Ciranna, Milan. Becomes Peace activist. Receives honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts from Pratt Institute, New York.

1967 Completes design for Sacco and Vanzetti mosaic mural for Syracuse University. "The Collected Prints of Ben Shahn," Philadelphia Museum of Art (November 15-December 31). "Ben Shahn: Paintings and Graphics," Santa Barbara and tour until 1968. Awarded the President's Medal, Art Directors Club; receives honorary degree of Doctor of Arts from Harvard University and elected to Academia de Artes y Ciencias, Puerto Rico.

1968 Exhibits Kennedy Galleries, New York (October 12-November 2) and Frederick Douglass Institute of Negro Arts

and History, Museum of African Art, Washington, DC. Works for Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign. Death of daughter, Susanna Shahn (December 8).

1969 Dies March 14. Retrospective exhibition New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, New Jersey. Exhibitions at Kennedy Galleries, New York; First exhibition devoted to photography, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 29 - December 14.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Ben Shahn did not title his photographs. They are identified here by location, subject, Library of Congress numbers if appropriate or titles supplied by museums or collectors. All illustrations are by Ben Shahn unless otherwise noted. All photographs are gelatin-silver prints. All photographs are reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress unless otherwise noted.

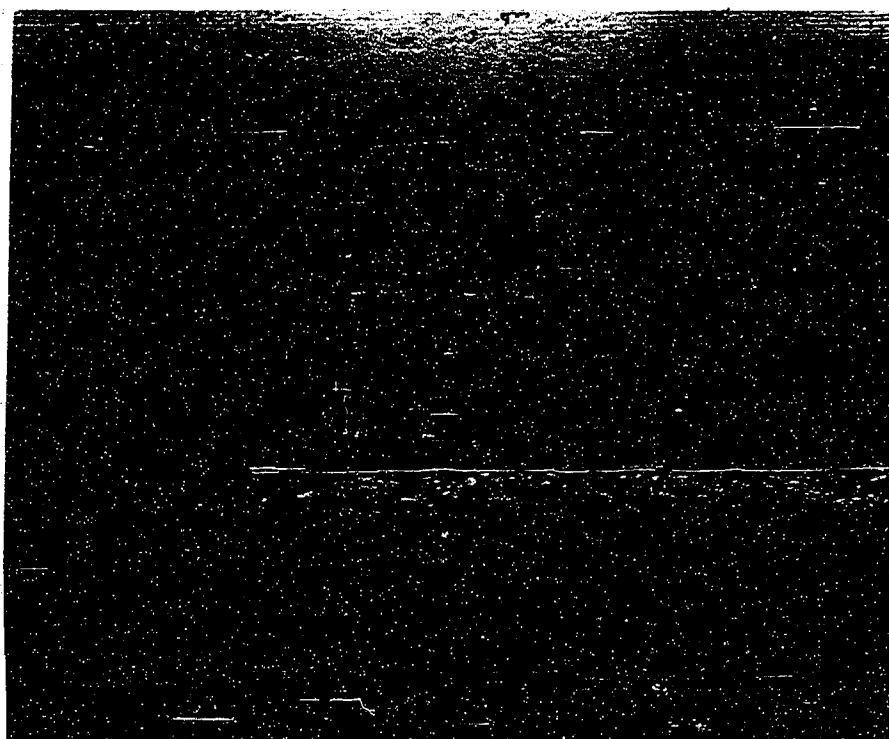


Fig. 1. *Vacant Lot*, 1939. Watercolor and gouache on paper mounted on plywood panel, 19 x 23 in., Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford Connecticut, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.

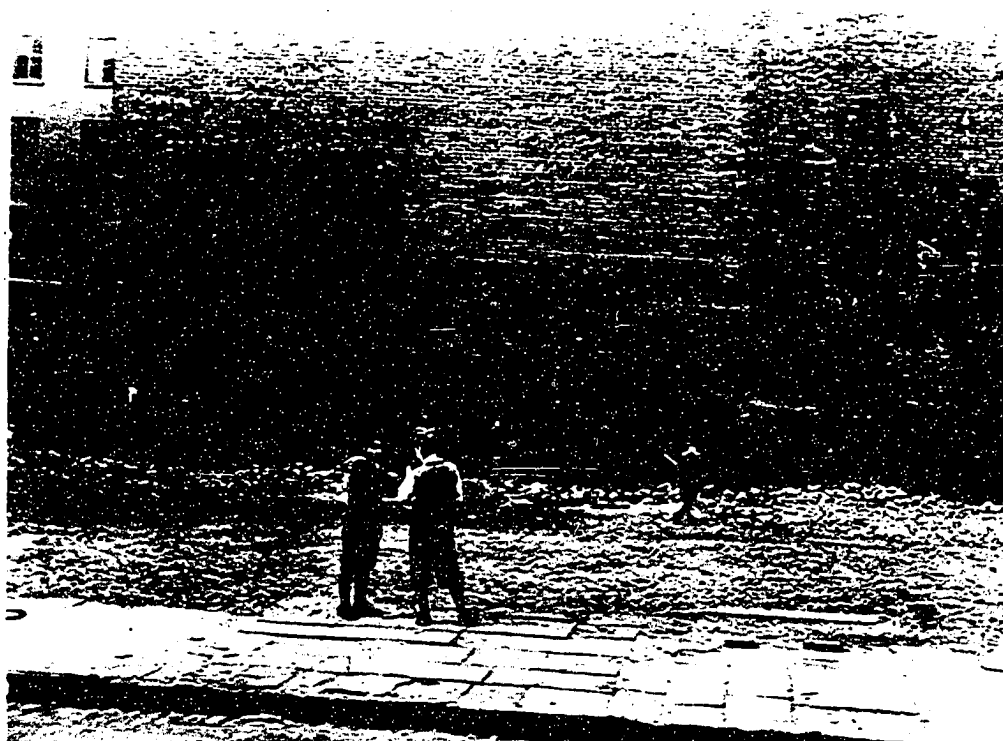


Fig. 2. Untitled (Boys in a Vacant Lot), 1931-32. 7 x 9 7/16 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell (1987.1100.425).

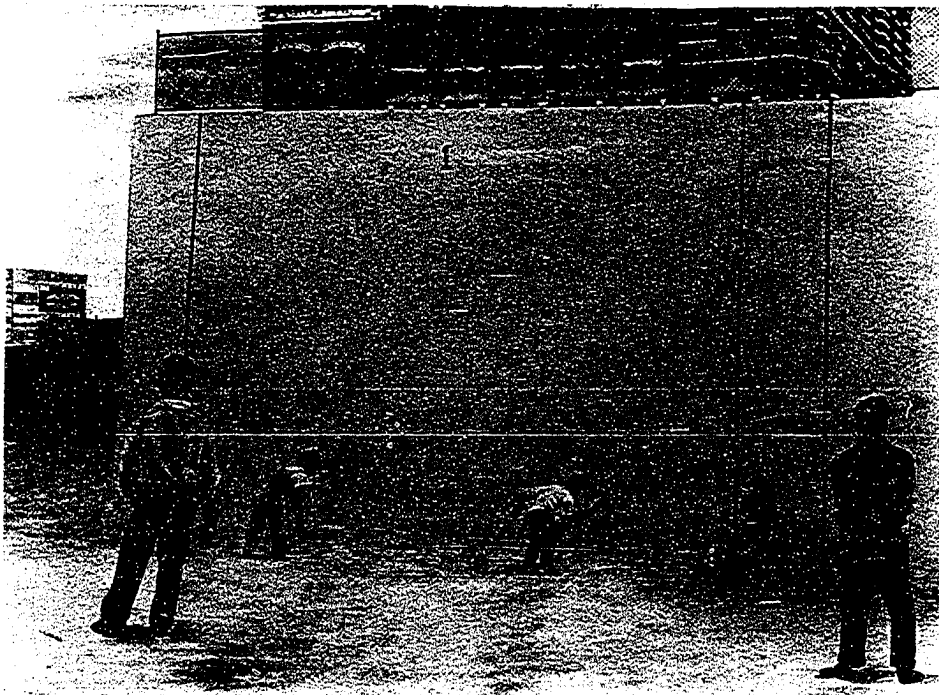


Fig. 3. *Handball*, 1939. Tempera on paper over composition board, 22 3/4 x 31 1/4 in., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund.



Fig. 4. Untitled (New York, New York), c., 1932. 7 x 9 1/2 in., The Fogg Art Museum Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Mrs. Bernarda B. Shahn.



Fig. 5. Untitled (Rehabilitation Client, Boone county, Arkansas), 1935. LC USF 33-6035-M4.



Fig. 6. Paul Strand, Photograph--New York, June 1916.

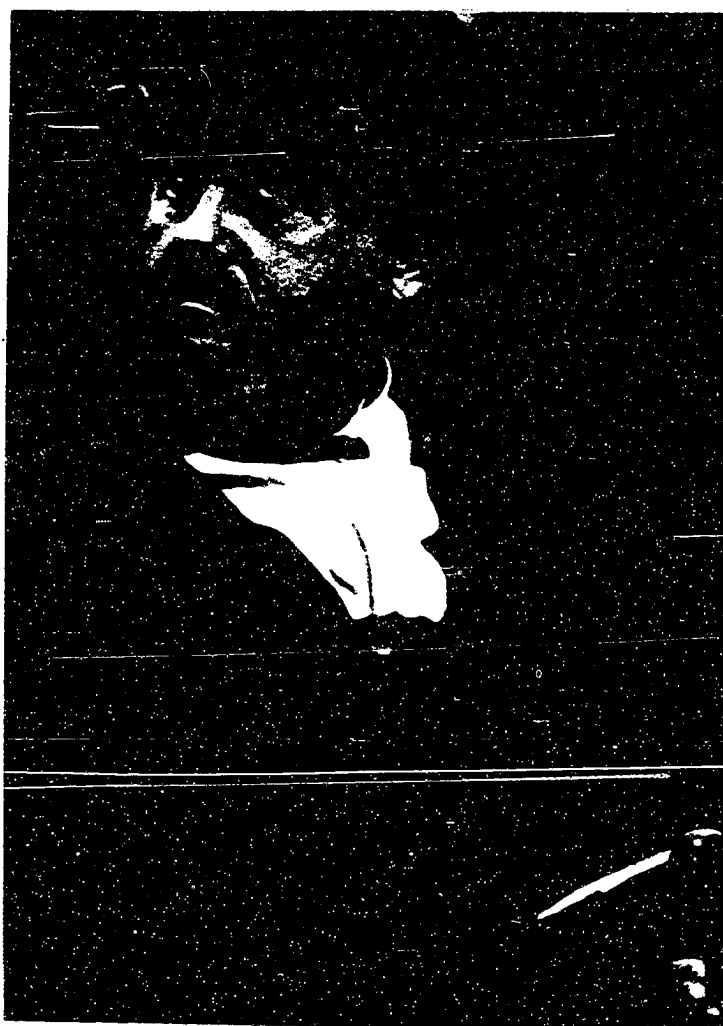


Fig. 7. Paul Strand. II, Photograph--New York, 1916.



Fig. 8. Cherry Street (New York), c. 1933. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums. Gift of Mrs. Bernarda B. Shahn (P1970.2797).



Fig. 9. Untitled (New York), c. 1933. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Mrs. Bernarda B. Shahn (P1970.2212).

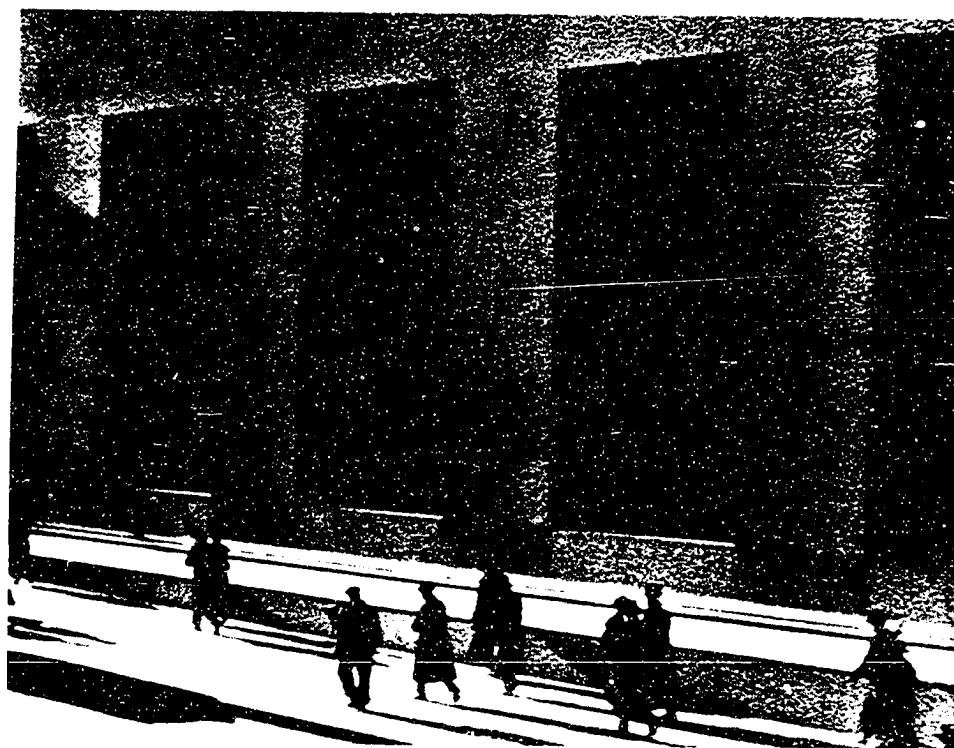


Fig. 10. Paul Strand. New York, 1916.



Fig. 11. Untitled (East 12th Street, New York), 1933. 6 1/4 x 9 5/8 in., Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Mrs. Bernarda B. Shahn (P1970.2470).

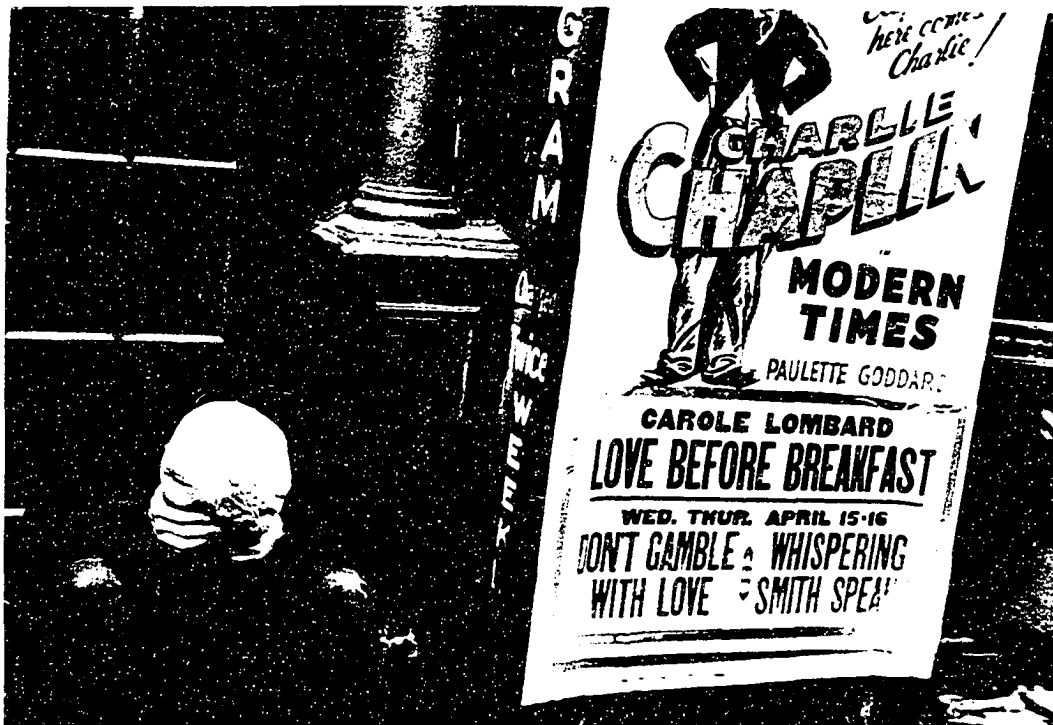


Fig. 12. Untitled (The Bowery, New York, New York), 1936. 6 x 9 1/2 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Bernarda B. Shahn (P1970.2809).



Fig. 13. Untitled (Man and woman on bridge), n.d. 5 5/8 x 8 in., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the photographer (SC76.02).



Fig. 14. Untitled (South Street, New York City), c. 1933.
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Gift of Bernarda B.
Shahn (P1970.2073).

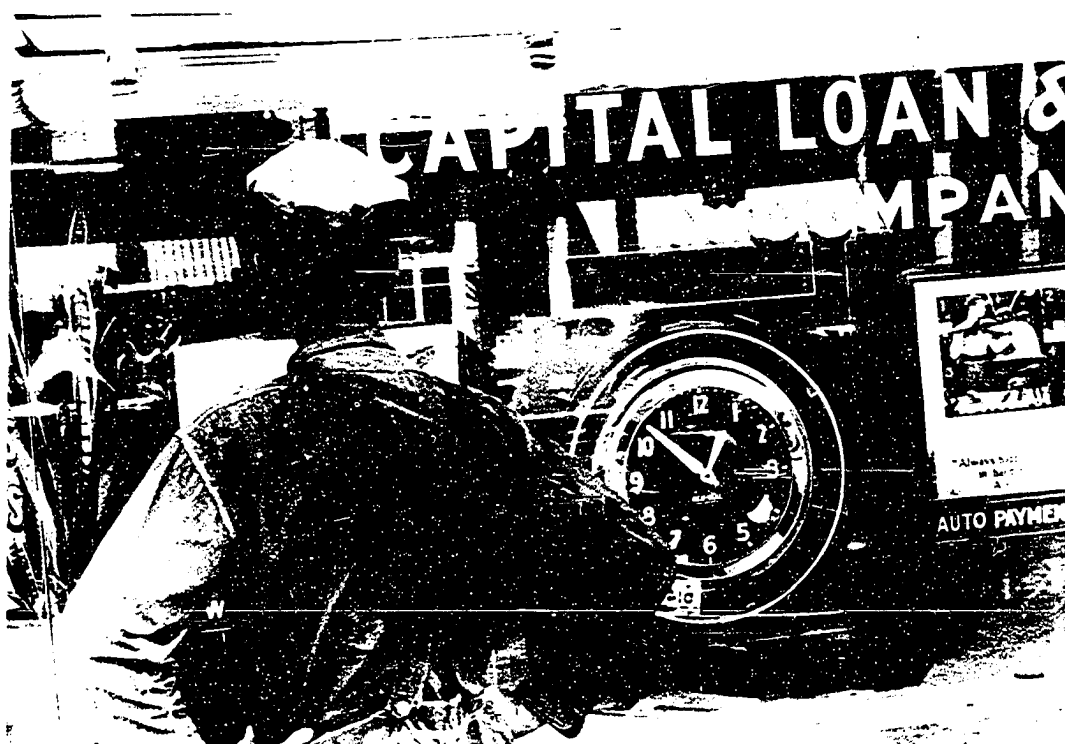


Fig. 15. Untitled (Street scene, Washington Court House, Ohio), 1938. LC USF 33-6420-M4.



Fig. 16. Untitled (May Day, Artists' Union Demonstration, New York, New York), 1935. 6 x 9 in., Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums. Gift of Bernarda B. Shahn (P1970.2818).



Fig. 17. Untitled, c. 1934. Roy Stryker Papers, Photographic Archives, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville (S525.165).



Fig. 18. Untitled (Welfare Island, New York), 1934. 6 1/2 x 9 1/2 in., Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn (P1970.2772).



Fig. 19. Untitled (A street scene, Smithland, Kentucky), 1935. LC USF 33-6077-M1.



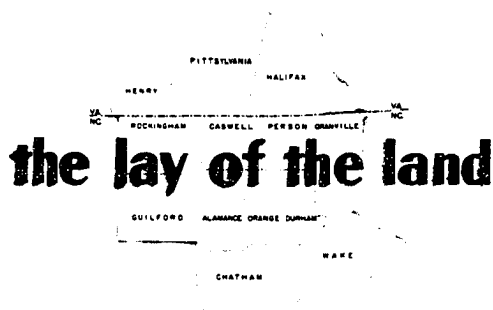
Fig. 20. Untitled (A child of the Fortuna family, a family of strawberry pickers, Hammond, Louisiana), 1935. LC USF 33-6174-M3.



Fig. 21. Untitled (Cotton pickers, Pulaski County, Arkansas), 1935. LC USF 33-6219-M2.



Fig. 22. Untitled (A sharecropper's child, Pulaski County, Arkansas), 1935. LC USF 33-6060-M5.



On 8,000 square miles of red and gray Piedmont land are 50,000 farms. Cotton, corn, hay, small grains, and livestock are raised, but are secondary to the chief money crop... tobacco



hay on a tobacco farm



corn on a tobacco farm



cotton where tobacco won't grow

Fig. 23. The Lay of the Land, poster, c. 1935. Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Fig. 24. Population increase, poster. Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Fig. 25. Arthur Rothstein, *Untitled (Skull, South Dakota Badlands)*, 1936. Reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress.



Fig. 26. Untitled (Deputy with a gun on his hip during strike, Morgantown, West Virginia), 1935. RA 6121 M-3.



Fig. 27. Untitled (A deputy with a gun on his hip during the September 1935 strike in Morgantown, W.Va.), 1935. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Gift of Mrs. Bernarda B. Shahn, (P1970.1225)



Fig. 28. Untitled (Purseglove mine, on Scott's Run, West Virginia), 1935. LC USF 33-6115-M-1.



Fig. 29. Untitled (Hungarian miner who has worked in the mine for 24 years. He is now 63 with no pension and no work, Calumet, W. Va), 1935. LC USF 33-6007-M-5.

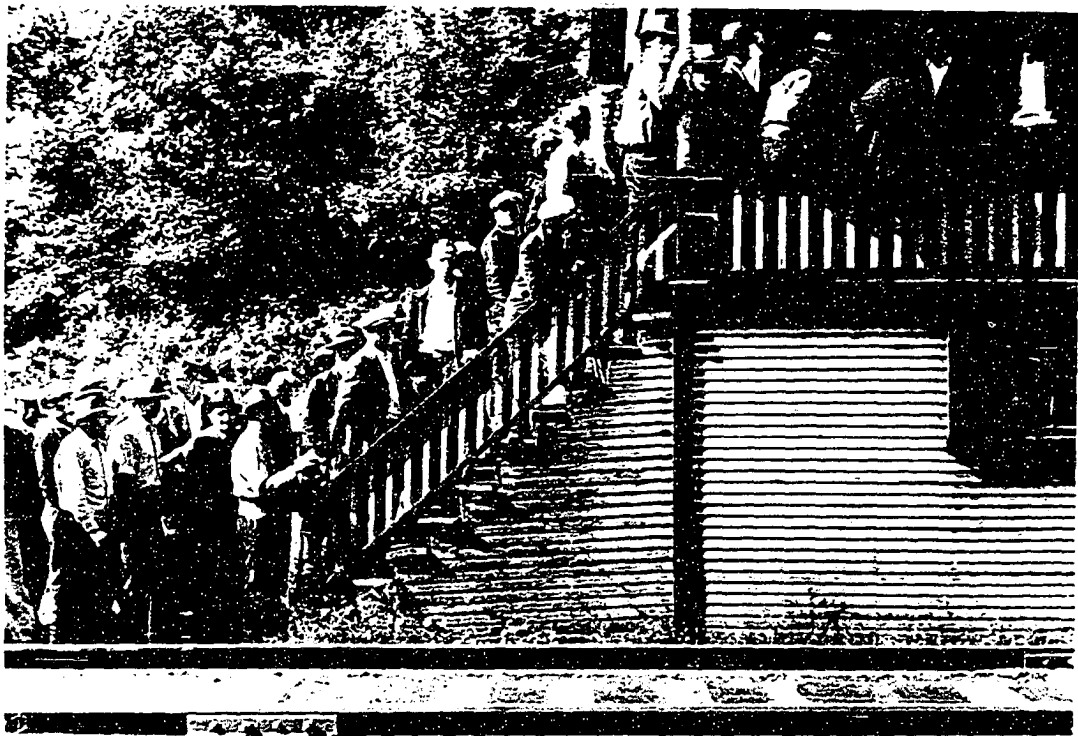


Fig. 30. Untitled (Payoff at Purseglove mine, Purseglove on Scott's Run, W.Va.), 1935. LC USF 33-6123 M-3.

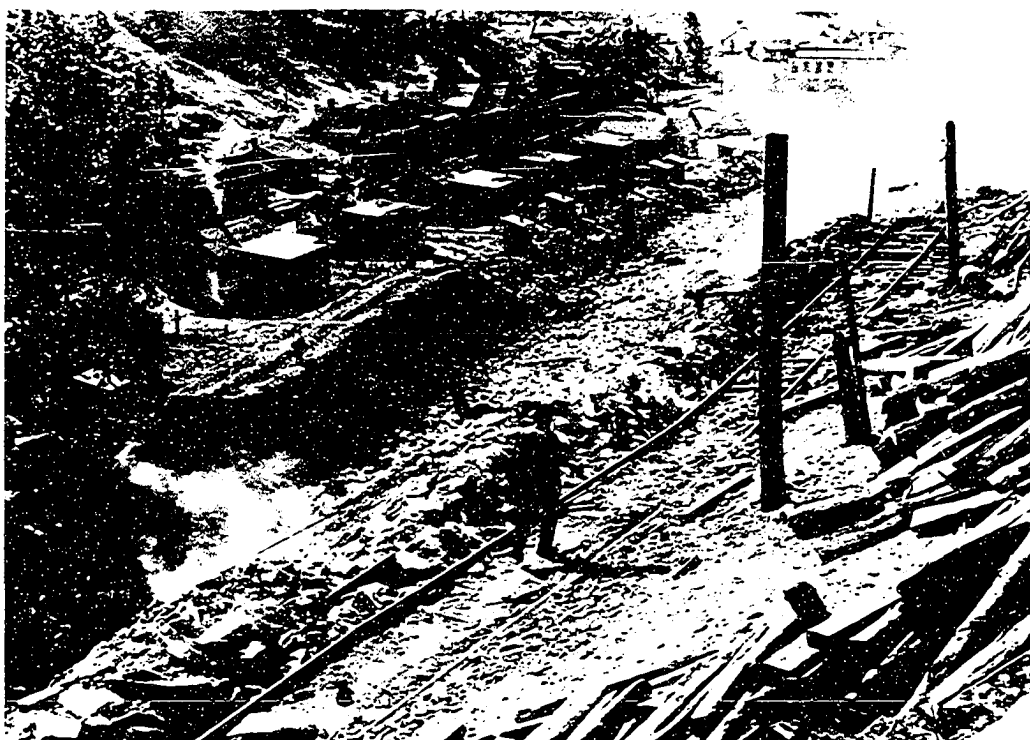


Fig. 31. Untitled (View of Freeze Fork, West Virginia), 1935.
LC USF 33-6150-M2.



Fig. 32. Untitled (Omar, West Virginia), 1935. RA-6203-M3.



Fig. 33. Untitled (A miner for Consolidated Coal Company, Jenkins, Ky.), 1935. LC USF 33-6194-M2.



Fig. 34. Untitled (Coal miners, Consolidated Coal Company, Jenkins, Ky.), 1935. LC USF 33-6195-M4.



Fig. 35. Untitled (A group of coal miners, Jenkins, Ky.), 1935. LC USF 33-6195-M2.

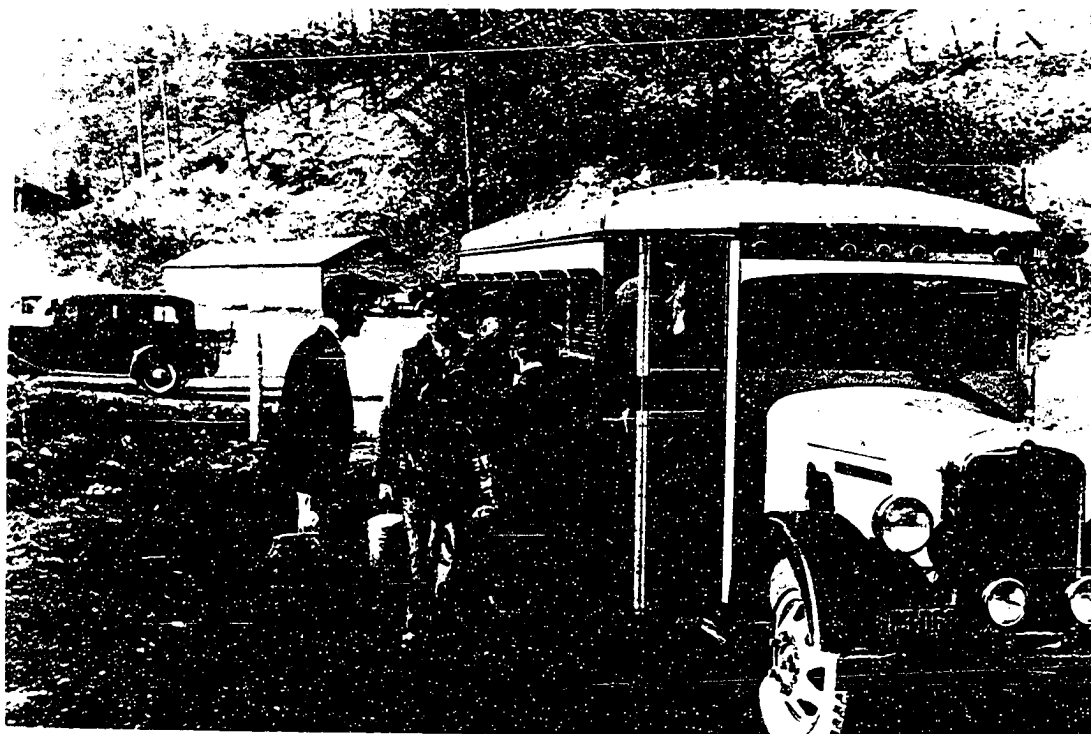


Fig. 36. Untitled (Coal miners going to the pit, Jenkins, Ky.), 1935. LC USF 33-6196-M5.

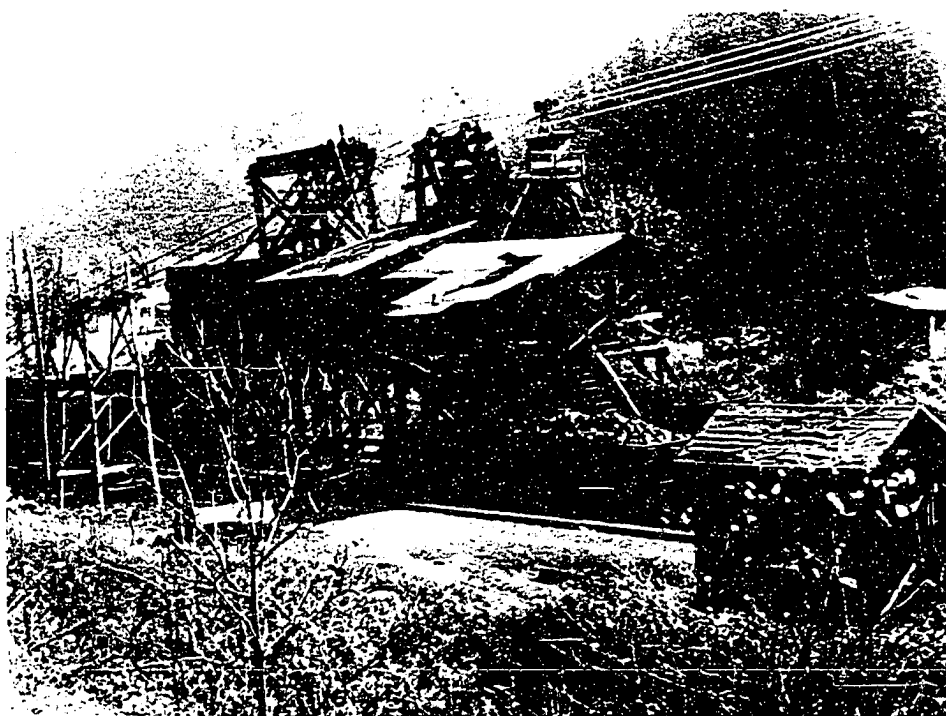


Fig. 37. Untitled (Loading coal, Jenkins, Ky.), 1935. LC USF 33-6193-M3.

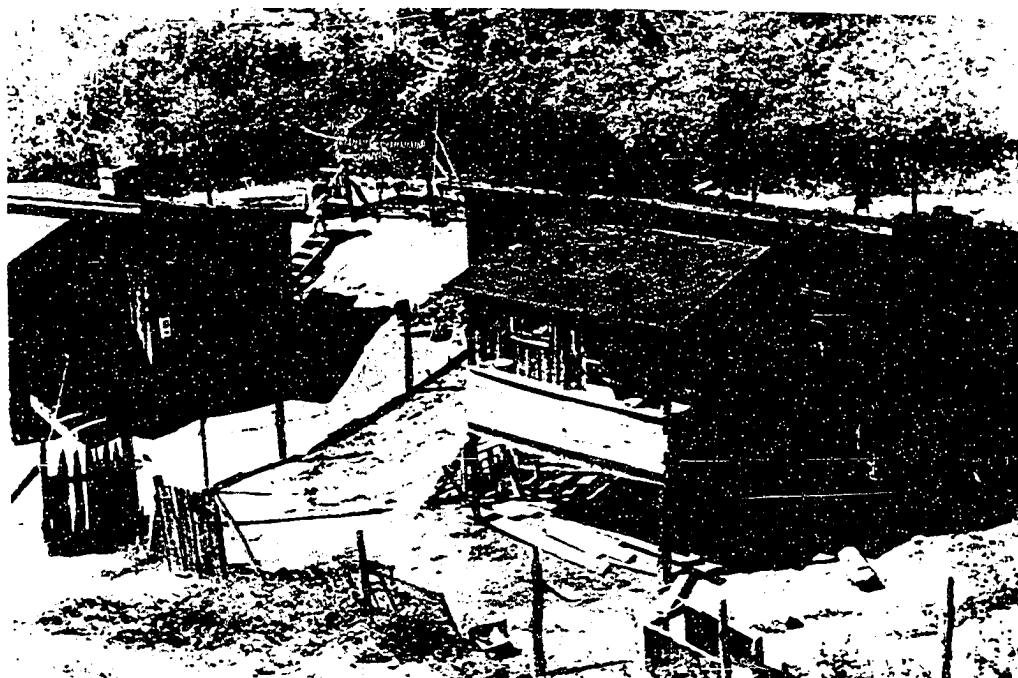


Fig. 38. Untitled (Mining shacks, Jenkins, Ky.), 1935. LC USF 33-6137-M5.



Fig. 39 Untitled (A deserted mining town, Zinc, Ark.), 1935
LC USF 33-605-M1.

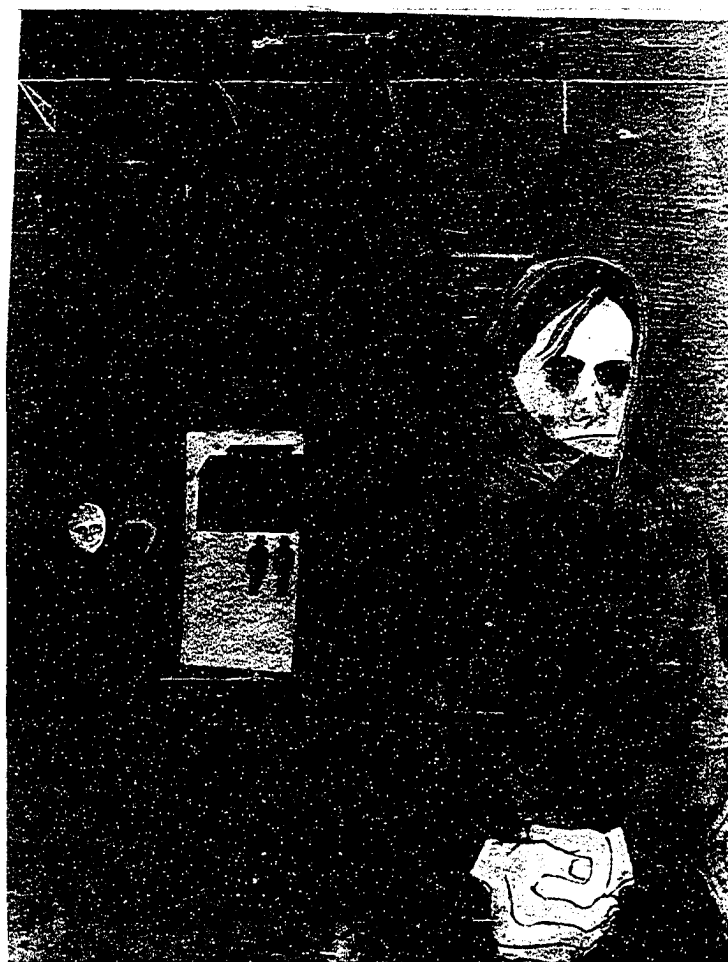


Fig. 40. *Miners' Wives*, 1948. Egg tempera on board, 48 x 36 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Given by Wright S. Ludington.



Fig. 41. *Death of Miner*, 1949. Tempera on wood, 27 x 48 in.,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund,
1950.



Fig. 42. Untitled (Rehabilitation Clients, Boone Cty., Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6034-M2.



Fig. 43. Untitled (Rehabilitation Client, Boone County, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6034-M1.



Fig. 44. Untitled (Sam Nichols, Boone County, Ark.), 1935. LC
USF 33-6087-M3.



Fig. 45. Untitled (The porch of the home of Sam Nichols), 1935. LC USF 33-6036-M2.



Fig. 46. Untitled (Stove of destitute family), 1935. LC USF 33-6072-M1.



Fig. 47. Untitled (Kitchen table, Calumet [W.Va. or Pa.]), 1935. LC USF 33-6005-M4.



Fig. 48. Untitled (Walking into town for relief food, Morgantown, on Scott's Run, W.Va.), 1935. RA-6129-M1.



Fig. 49. Untitled (Miner's sons, Morgantown on Scott's Run, W. Va.), 1935. LC USF 33-6014-M2.



Fig. 50. Untitled (Puppets for a show, a rural rehabilitation project of the U.S. Resettlement Administration, Red House, W.Va.), 1935. LC USF 33-6333-M1.



Fig. 51. Untitled (The wife and child of a sharecropper. Ozark Mt. region of Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6032-M1.



Fig. 52. Untitled (Children of destitute mountaineers), 1935.
LC USF 33-6032-M3.



Fig. 53. Untitled (Daughters of Virgil Thaxton, Mechanicsburg [vicinity], Ohio), 1938. LC USF 33-6460-M3.



Fig. 54. Untitled (Children of Rehabilitation Client, Rural area, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6049-M2.



Fig. 55. Untitled (Child of a Resettlement administration client, Ozark Mt. area, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6056-M2.



Fig. 56. Untitled (Mountaineer children, Ozark Mt. area in Ark.), 1935 LC USF 33-6064-M1.



Fig. 57. Untitled (A destitute family, Ozark Mt. area, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6071-M4.



Fig. 58. Untitled (The son of a destitute family, Ozark Mt. area, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6070-M3.



Fig. 59. Untitled (A medicine show. Huntingdon, Tenn.), 1935.
LC USF 33-6164-M3.



Fig. 60. Untitled (Medicine show, Huntingdon, Tenn.), 1935.
LC USF 33-6164-M1.



Fig. 61. Untitled (Medicine show, Huntingdon, Tenn.), 1935.
LC USF 33-6164-M5.



Fig. 62. Untitled (Medicine show, Huntingdon, Tenn.), 1935.
LC USF 33-6166-M4.



Fig. 63. Untitled (Medicine show, Huntingdon, Tenn.), 1935.



Fig. 64. Untitled (A blind street musician, West Memphis, Ark.), 1935. RA-6017-M2.



Fig. 65. Untitled (Accordion player, New York), n.d. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Gift of Mrs. Bernarda B. Shahn (P1970.2091).

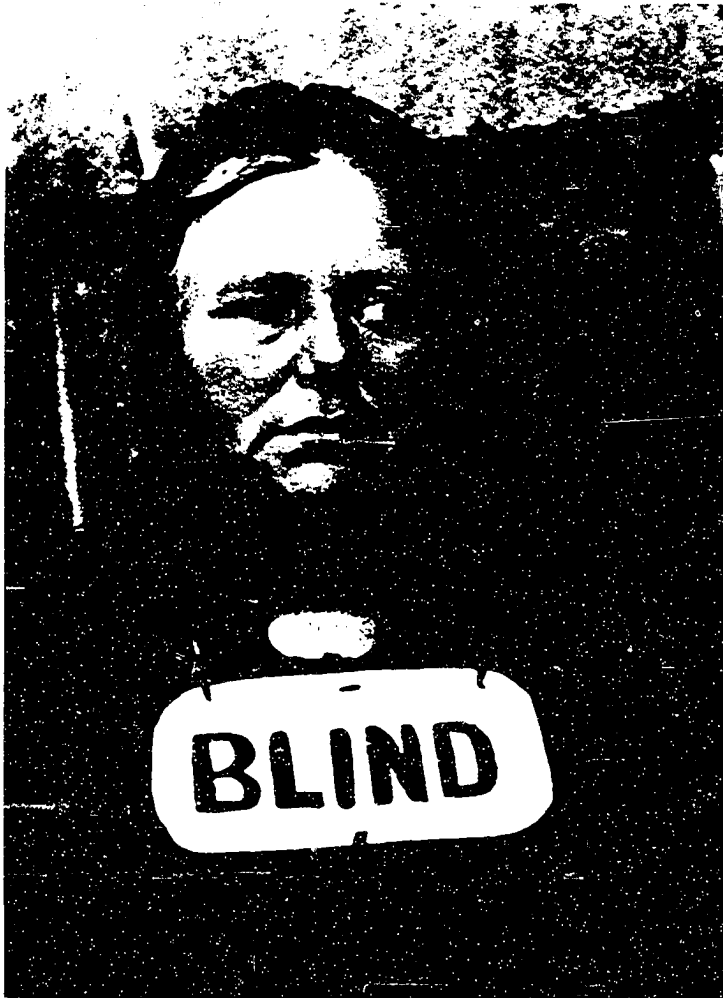


Fig. 66. Paul Strand, *New York*, 1916.



Fig. 67. Untitled (Cotton pickers at 6:30 a.m. on the Alexander Plantation, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6029-M3.



Fig. 68. Untitled (Cotton pickers at 6:30 a.m. Alexander Plantation), 1935. LC USF 33-6027-M4.



Fig. 69. Untitled (A cotton picker in Arkansas), 1935. LC USF 33-6029-M5.



Fig. 70. Untitled (Cotton pickers at 6:30 a.m. on the Alexander Plantation), 1935. LC USF 33-6028-M2.



Fig. 71. Untitled (Cotton pickers in Arkansas), 1935. LC USF 33-6029-M4.



Fig. 72. Untitled (A sharecropper's children), 1935. LC USF 33-6026-M4.



Fig. 73. Untitled (A young cotton picker, Pulaski County, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6218-M5.



Fig. 74. Untitled (Picking cotton, Pulaski County, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6220-M2.



Fig. 75. Untitled (Negro cotton pickers in field, Pulaski, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 3-6220-M4.



Fig. 76. Dorothea Lange. Untitled (Filipinos Working in Lettuce field, Salinas, Calif.), 1936.



Fig. 77. Untitled (Weighing in cotton, Pulaski county, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6020-M2.



Fig. 78. Untitled (Checking in cotton, Little Rock, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6020-M1.



Fig. 79. Untitled (Cotton pickers at the end of the day. Pulaski County, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6221-M2.

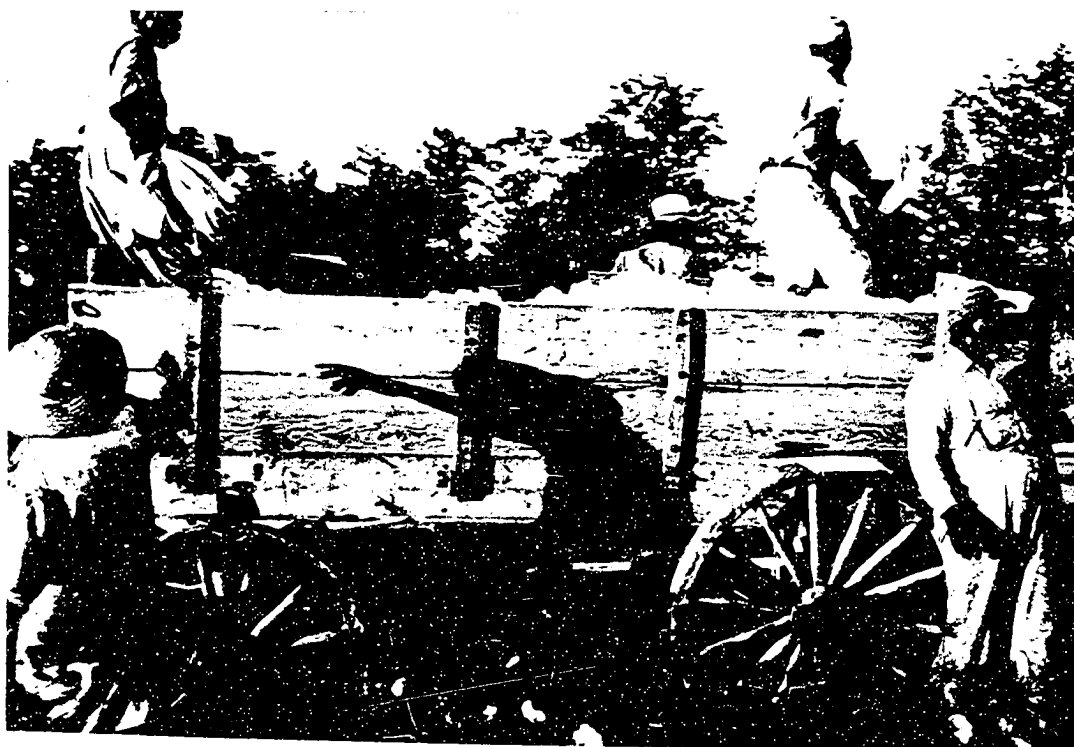


Fig. 80. Untitled (Bringing in cotton for weighing. Pulaski County, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 3-6021-M3.

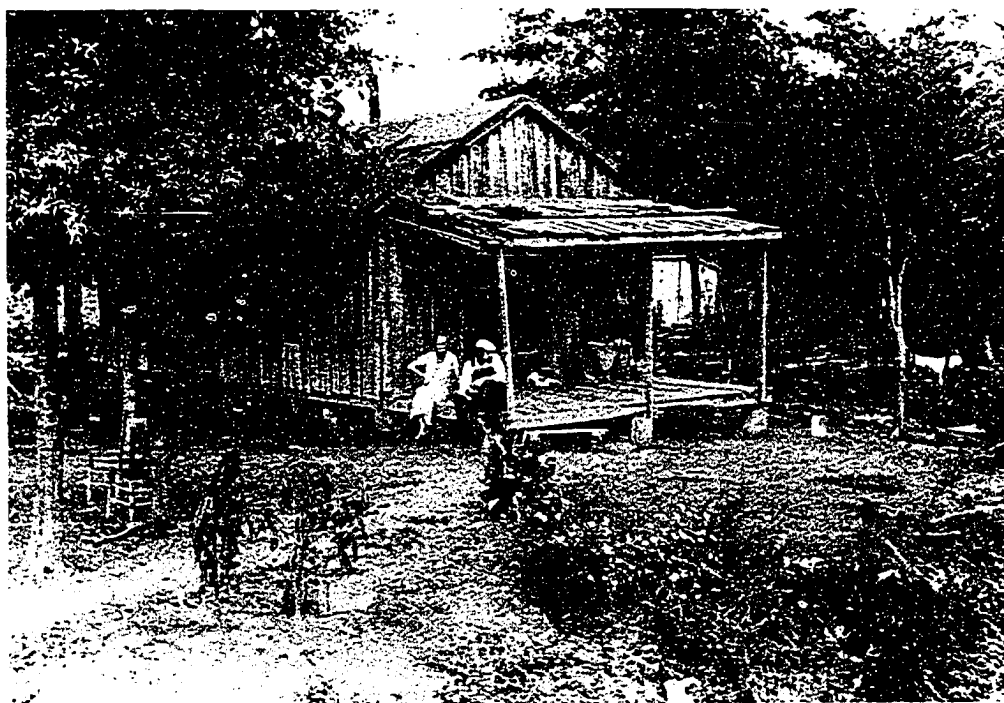


Fig. 81. Untitled (A sharecropper's house which is optioned by the Resettlement Administration, Mississippi County, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6047-M1.



Fig. 82. Margaret Bourke-White. Untitled (a religious meeting in South Carolina), n.d. *You Have Seen Their Faces*.



Fig. 83. Margaret Bourke-White. *Untitled (Religious Meeting, South Carolina)*, n.d. *You Have Seen Their Faces*.



Fig. 84. Ben Shahn, *Myself Among the Churchgoers*, 1939.
Tempera, 20 x 29 1/2 in., The Regis Collection, Minneapolis,
Minnesota.



Fig. 85. Untitled (Natchez, Mississippi), 1935. LC USF 33-6073-M4.



Fig. 86. *WPA Sunday*, 1939. Gouache on paper, 20 x 30 1/2 in., Fukushima Prefectoral Museum of Art, Japan.



Fig. 87. Untitled (Omar, on Scott's Run, West Va.), 1935. LC
USF 33-6202-M3.



Fig. 88. Untitled (Omar on Scott's Run, W.Va.), 1935. LC USF 33-6201-M4.

c



Fig. 89. Untitled (Sunday, Scott's Run, W.Va.), 1935. LC USF 33-6115-M3.



Fig. 90. *Scott's Run, West Virginia*, 1937. Tempera on cardboard, 22 1/4 x 27 7/8 in., Whitney Museum of American Art, Purchase, 38.11.



Fig. 91. Untitled (Williamson, West Va., A religious sign in a cornfield), 1935. RA 6192-M5.

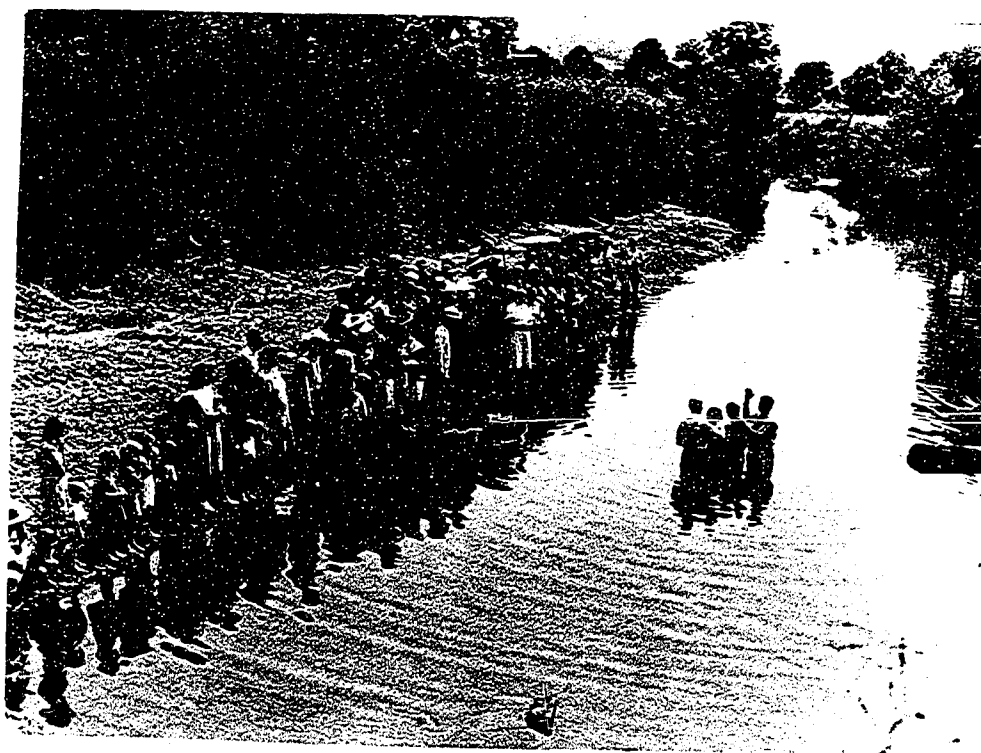


Fig. 92. Marion Post Wolcott, Untitled (Primitive Baptist, Morehead, Ky.), 1940. Reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress.

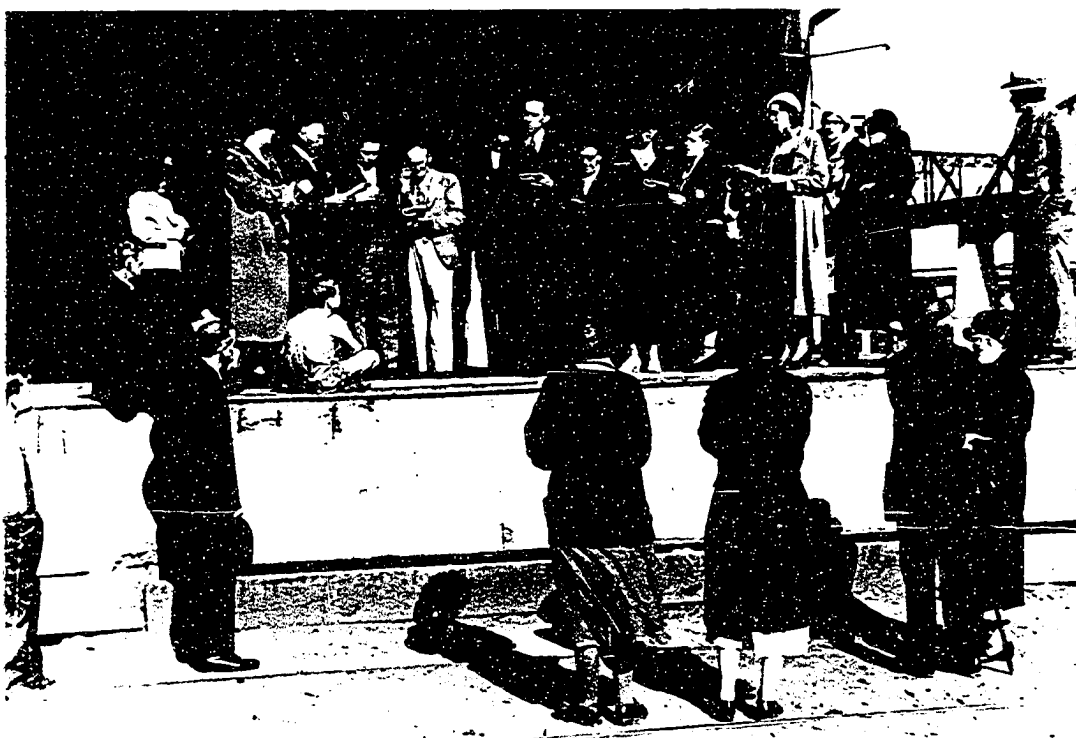


Fig. 93. Untitled (A religious meeting, Nashville, Tenn.), LC
USF 33-6103-M1.



Fig. 94. Untitled (A religious meeting), 1935. LC USF 33-6104-M5.



Fig. 95. Untitled (A religious meeting), 1935. LC USF 33-6104-M4.



Fig. 96. Untitled (At a religious meeting), 1935. LC USF 33-6103-M3.



Fig. 97. Untitled (A religious meeting, Nashville, Tenn.), 1935. LC USF 33-6102-M5.

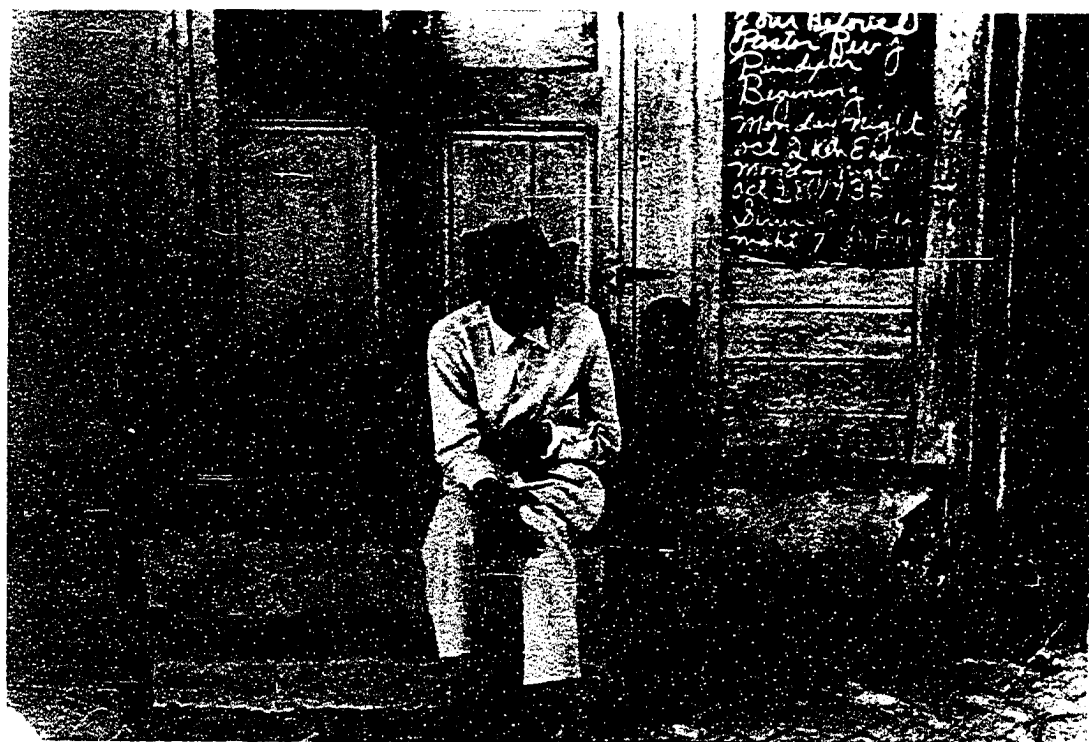


Fig. 98. Untitled (New Orleans, Louisiana, street scene), LC
USF 33-6099-M4.



Fig. 99. Untitled (Negroes gathered in front of church on Sunday, Little Rock, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6025-M5.



Fig. 100. Untitled (Negroes coming out of church on Sunday, Little Rock, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6023-M3.



Fig. 101. Untitled (In front of a church on Sunday, Little Rock, Ark.), 1935. LC USF 33-6023-M1.



Fig. 102. Walker Evans, Wooden Church, South Carolina, 1936.
Reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress.



Fig. 103. Walker Evans, Negro Church, South Carolina, 1936.
Reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress.



Fig. 104. Untitled (Deckhand aboard the Queen of Dycusburg, Memphis, Tenn.), 1935. LC USF 33-6082-M5.

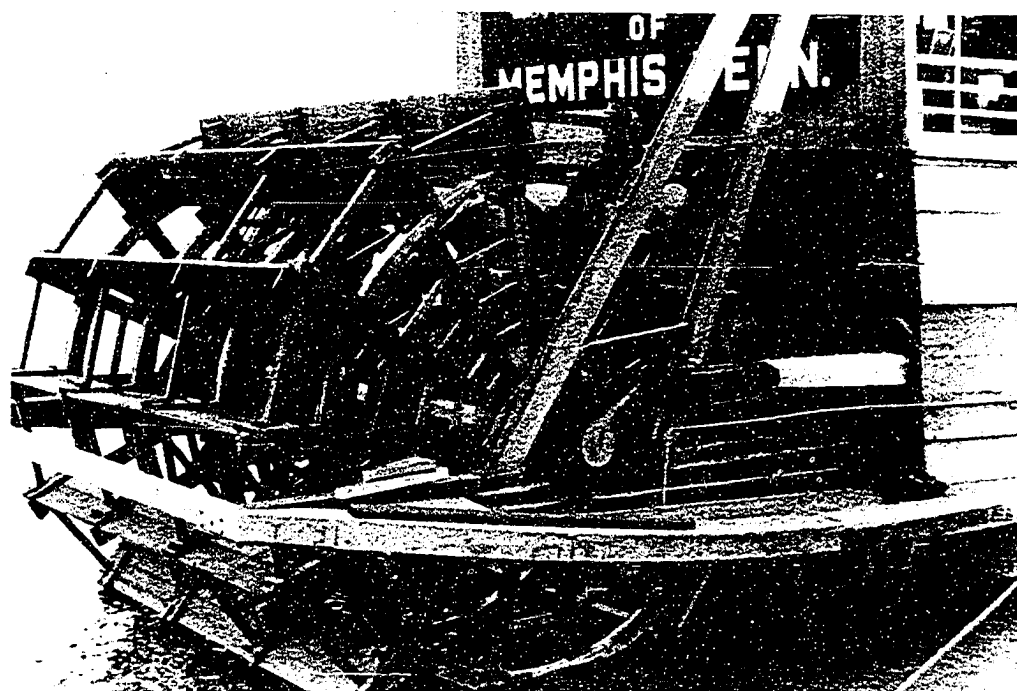


Fig. 105. Untitled (The J.B. Smith, an old riverboat docked, Memphis, Tenn.), 1935. LC USF 33-6083-M1.



Fig. 106. Untitled (A house in the poorer section of town, Natchez, Mississippi), 1935. LC USF 33-6076-M3.



Fig. 107. Untitled (Three Negroes sitting in front of a cafe, Natchez, Miss.), 1935. LC USF 33-6093-M1.

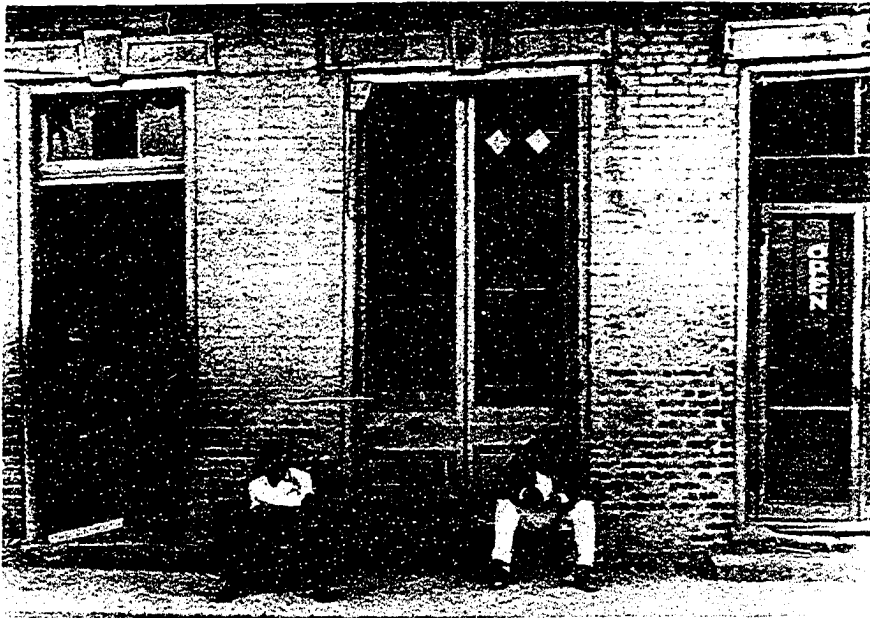


Fig. 108. Untitled (Two negroes sitting outside a building, Natchez, Mississippi), 1935. LC USF 33-6095-M5.



Fig. 109. Untitled (A Negro child in front of a badly run down house, Natchez, Miss.), 1935. LC USF 33-6093-M3.

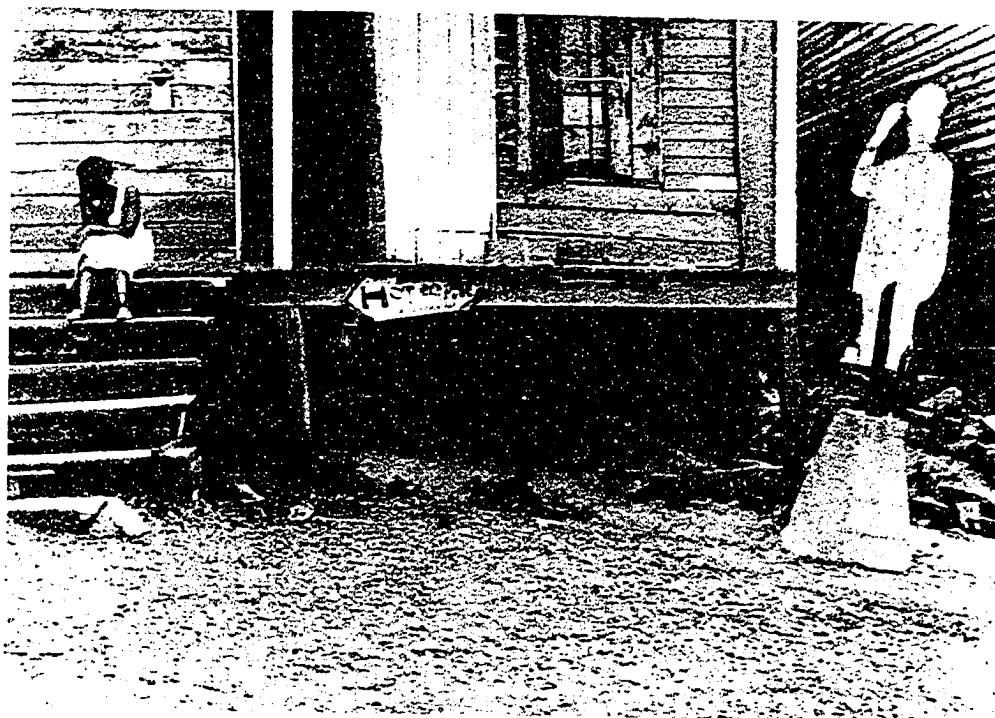


Fig. 110. Untitled (A Negro woman sitting on a porch, Natchez, Miss.), 1935. LC USF 33-6095-M4.



Fig. 111. Untitled (A group of Negroes in front of a Cafe, Natchez, Miss.), 1935. LC USF 33-6074-M4.



Fig. 112. Untitled (Loading cotton, Natchez, Miss.), 1935. LC
USF 33-6095-M2.



Fig. 113. Untitled (Two men talking, Amite, Louisiana), 1935.
LC USF 33-6212-M2.



Fig. 114. Untitled (A grocery store window, Amite, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6213-M2.



Fig. 115. Untitled (A street tailor, New Orleans, La.), 1935.
LC USF 33-6099-M5.



Fig. 116. Untitled (A scene in Jackson Square, New Orleans, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6183-M4.



Fig. 117. Untitled (New York, People on a Park Bench), n.d.
6 3/16 x 9 1/2 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift
of the photographer, 72.76.



Fig. 118. Untitled (Bringing in scabs, New Orleans, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6173-M2.



Fig. 119. Untitled (Applicants for jobs waiting before the Federal Emergency relief, New Orleans, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6160-M3.



Fig. 120. Untitled (Applicants waiting for jobs in front of Federal emergency relief, New Orleans, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6160-M1.



Fig. 121. Untitled (A small girl and an unemployed Negro trapper, Plaquemines Parish, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6156-M1.

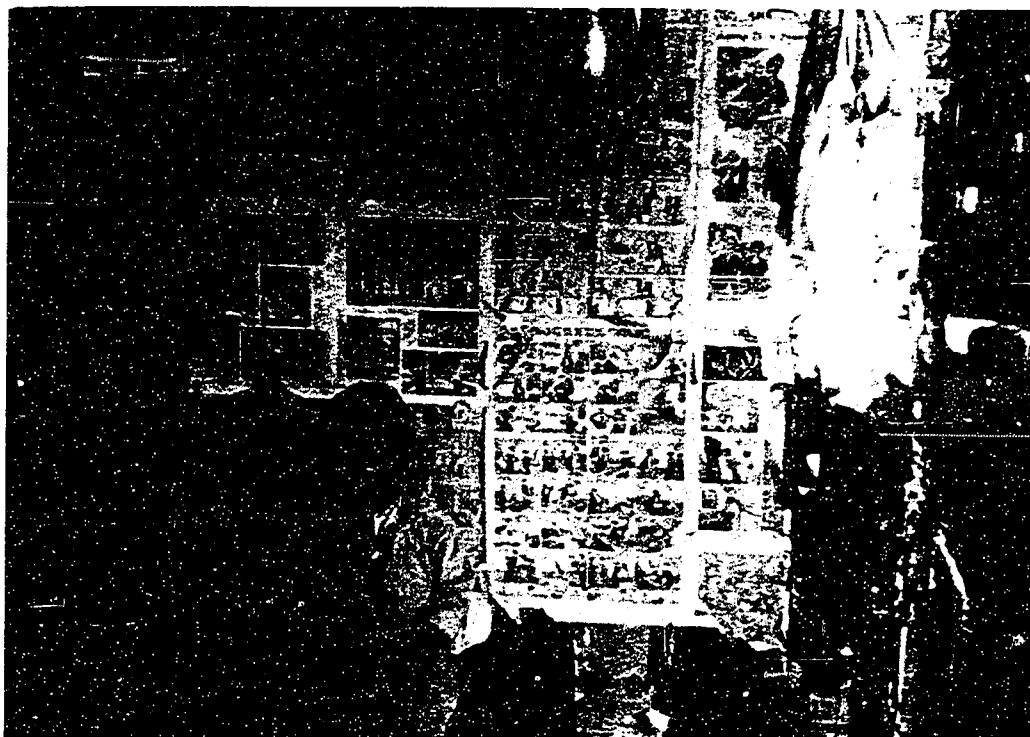


Fig. 122. Untitled (The interior of a Negro sharecropper's home in Louisiana), 1935. LC USF 33-6018-M2.



Fig. 123. Untitled (Levee workers, Plaquemines Parish, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6113-M4.



Fig. 124. Untitled (A sugar cane worker. Plaquemines Parish, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6111-M3.



Fig. 125. Untitled (Three Creole Girls, Plaquemines Parish, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6159-M1.



Fig. 126. Untitled (A cemetery. Pointe a la Hache, La.),
1935. LC USF 33-6172-M4.



Fig. 127. Untitled (A priest at the cemetery with the man who paints the tombs, Pointe a la Hache, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6171-M1.



Fig. 128. Untitled (A priest at the cemetery, Pointe a la Hache, La.), 1935. LC USF 33-6171-M2.

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