Documentary photographer Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) is best known for her work during the 1930s with Roosevelt’s Farm Security Administration (FSA). Born in New Jersey, Lange studied photography at Columbia University, then moved to San Francisco in 1919 earning a living as a successful portrait photographer.

In 1935 in the midst of the Great Depression, Lange brought her large-format Graflex camera out of the studio and onto the streets. Her photos of the homeless and unemployed in San Francisco’s breadlines, labor demonstrations, and soup kitchens led to a job with the FSA. From 1935 to 1939, Lange's arresting FSA images—drawing upon her strength as a portrait photographer—brought the plight of the nation’s poor and forgotten peoples, especially sharecroppers, displaced families, and migrant workers, into the public eye. Her image "Migrant Mother" is arguably the best-known documentary photograph of the 20th century and has become a symbol of resilience in the face of adversity.

Lange’s reports from the field included not just photographs, but the words of the people with whom she’d spoken, quoted directly. "Somethin’ is radical wrong," one told her; another said, "I don’t believe the President (Roosevelt) knows what’s happening to us here." Lange also included her own observations. "They have built homes here out of nothing," she wrote, referring to the cardboard and plywood "Okievilles" scattered throughout California’s Central Valley. "They have planted trees and flowers. These flimsy shacks represent many a last stand to maintain self-respect."

At the age of seven Lange contracted polio, which left her right leg and foot noticeably weakened. She said of her disability, “It formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, humiliated me — all those things at once. I’ve never gotten over it, and I am aware of the force and power of it. The limp that she carried for life made her more conscious of photographing those marginalized by society. In 1941, Lange was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for excellence in photography. Though other FSA photographers went on to commercial careers, she remained a documentarian to the end, hoping that—by looking more closely at ourselves—we would come to understand ourselves. In an interview before her death, Lange summarized the essence of a photograph, as "...an act of love. That’s the deepest thing behind it," she reflected. "The audience, the recipient of it, gives that back."

Credit: Adapted from The Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division