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Errol Morris

October 24, 2009, 7:30 PM

The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock (Part 7)

By ERROL MORRIS

This is the final installment of a [seven-part series](#).

THE END OF THE WORLD



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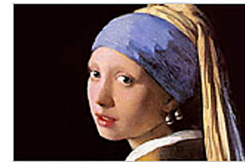
About Errol Morris



Errol Morris is a filmmaker whose movie "The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara" won the Academy Award for best documentary feature in 2004. He has also directed "Gates of Heaven," "The Thin Blue Line," "Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control," "A Brief History of Time" and "Standard Operating Procedure." A book of his essays (many of which have appeared here) will be published later this year. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and lives with his wife and French bulldog in Cambridge, Mass.

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What Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?

A three-part challenge to the accepted wisdom behind the origin of two famous Crimean War photographs by Roger Fenton.

In 1974, Bill Ganzel, a photographer from Lincoln, Neb., went on an extended road trip. For seven years, carrying copies of photographs by Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans and others, Ganzel sought the same people and scenes that the F.S.A. photographers had taken during the 1930s. In 1986, he published "Dust Bowl Descent."

BILL GANZEL: When I was in college, I saw an exhibit at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery — which is on the University of Nebraska campus — of FSA photographs, and was just really taken with the way that they brought down to day-to-day living what the big historical event, the Depression, was all about. I was looking at Migrant Mother's face and saw desperation. I started doing some reading about that. My family was going back to Washington, D.C. We got an aunt who lives there, lives in D.C. And somewhere I came across the information that all these photographs were in the Library of Congress. And I thought, well, rather than doing the tourist stuff that I'd done before, I wonder what it would be like to go to the Library of Congress? I did. A college student coming in and claiming to be a researcher, and they bought it. They said, "O.k., yeah. Come on in. Sign these forms, and you can look at the photographs." I don't know whether you've ever been to the F.S.A. room. At least what it was like then was that it — just file cabinet after file cabinet. And you can sit there and flip through photographs. There are 80,000 photographs in the collection. Obviously I never got through the entire collection. But I decided to look at a local area, the Great Plains. And then what was I going to do with those photographs when I came back? I had photocopied some of the

photographs just to have them. And somehow thought, “Well, O.K., I can go out for a weekend or whatever. And maybe I can find the same place, just to see how it changed.”



Library of Congress

BILL GANZEL: I started with Nebraska, but the project existed in my mind for ten years and ended up taking a lot of time and 50,000 miles of driving. It started out — just find the same places. And then, oh, man, what would it be like to find the same people? What happened to them? It just seemed like a logical no-brainer idea. And coincidentally about the same time that I got really serious about my project the “re-photography folks,” Mark Klett and other guys, were starting their projects. [Mark Klett has been involved in a lifelong project to re-photograph many of the famous photographed landscapes of the past.[41] Essentially, to document how things change over time.]



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Then-and-now photo pair from the “Rephotographic Survey” project.

ERROL MORRIS: But you didn’t know about any of that when you first started.

BILL GANZEL: Not when I first started, no. It just seemed logical. It just seemed compelling to me.

ERROL MORRIS: Also the Klett material is really about landscapes, not about people.

BILL GANZEL: Yeah, exactly. And that’s one of the differences. Their whole thing was to be very scientific, that if you got in the same tripod sticks — in the same time of year, same everything. There was one pair of photographs that showed these standing rock formations. And he said, “Right behind our camera position there was a suburban development.” And the photograph, because they had to be in the same tripod sticks didn’t show that. To me, the suburban development was the story. But their photograph didn’t show it. It showed wilderness. You could read it still as wilderness. But the reality was, right behind the wilderness was suburbs.

ERROL MORRIS: Did they take another picture that showed the suburbs?

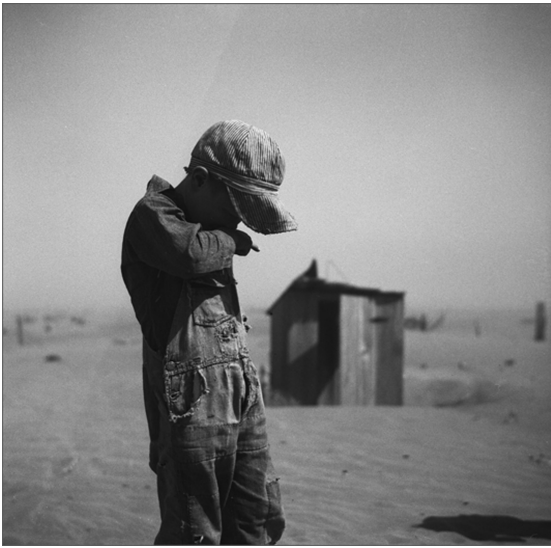
BILL GANZEL: No. They took the picture, but it wasn’t the suburb photograph that I would have shot. And I’m not necessarily criticizing them or anything. I’m just saying it’s a difference of approach. Theirs was scientific. Mine was documentary. Mine was humanistic. That’s what got me intrigued with the F.S.A. The F.S.A. focus was humanistic and much more documentary.

ERROL MORRIS: Documentary in the sense of documenting people?

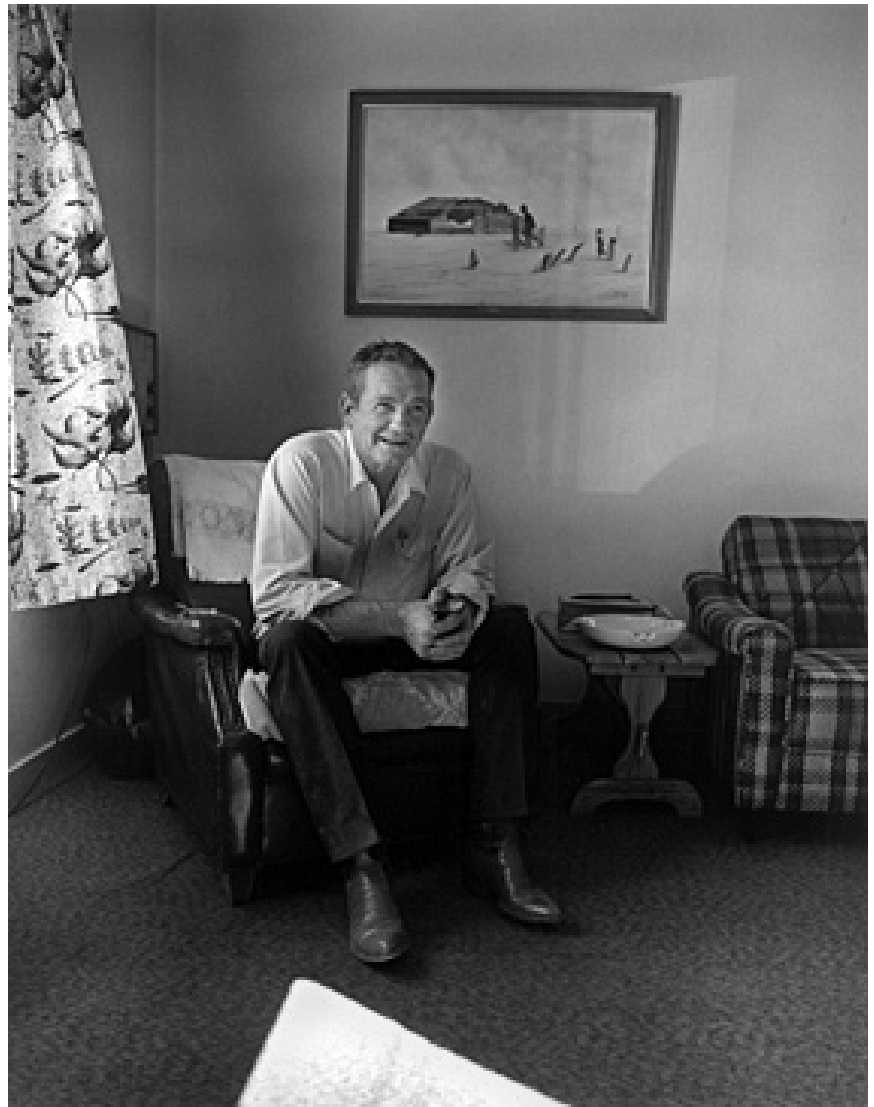
BILL GANZEL: And beyond that. If you look at what Stryker was after. He was the guiding light of the collection. He talked about wanting to make an encyclopedic collection of America in the middle of the Great Depression. And so his shooting scripts were always talking about, “Well, this region is...” “This is the sociology. This is the economy. These are the people. These are the institutions of this region. These are the photographs you need to get. Oh, and by the way, maybe you need to photograph some of the F.S.A. clients or some of the things that the standard propagandists would do.” I wanted to reconnect with the people.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. I can tell you about my favorite photograph in your book. It’s the little boy — now a middle-aged man — underneath a painting of Rothstein’s photograph. There is something so strange about this image being reinvented and recreated, and recreated once again in your photograph years later with the painting of the photograph behind him.

BILL GANZEL: Yes. That’s Darrell Coble. This was pretty early on in the process for me. Anyway. It didn’t have any names with the original F.S.A. photograph. Arthur’s caption didn’t include names on the photo card. And so I thought, “How the hell am I going to find this guy?” And I thought, “Well, a lot of the county agents, they know a lot of what goes on in these counties.”



Library of Congress



Courtesy of Bill Ganzel

And so I called up the county agent. I got a secretary. The county agent wasn't in. And she says, "Can I help you?" And I said, "Well, yeah, O.K. There's this really famous photograph of a kid." Before I even got through with my description, she says, "Oh yeah, that's Darrel Coble. He lives out there. Here's his phone number. He's a nice guy. Call him up." She knew all about it because of the photograph and because it had been published. He had become that minor celebrity in the county because of the photograph. And so I called Darrel up and he was very nice. And the painting there was painted by a local artist. And my memory of that story was — I don't think I've got it on tape — but he said the artist, she just did it on her own and gave it to him.

ERROL MORRIS: It's so interesting.

BILL GANZEL: Yes, and I love his quote: "My dad always used to say, 'If you wear out two pairs of shoes, you'd never leave.'" It's been 40 years on. Look is now in the Library of Congress. All the collection is in the Library of Congress. And it's finally available, because they've got them catalogued.

I wasn't aware that Rothstein had tracked him down already in the sixties. Arthur had gone back to Darrell. And it happened to be a pretty wet year. In Look magazine, they did a then and now pairing that Arthur shot.[42] And it has Darrel with a lot of greenery around him a lot of lush plants around him.

ERROL MORRIS: I'm surprised that Rothstein himself wanted to go back.

BILL GANZEL: Yes. And way before Rothstein did that, John Vachon [another F.S.A. photographer] did that as well. The Walker Evans and the John Vachon taken a couple of years apart. [Ann Shirley in "Chatterbox" and Carole Lombard in "Love Before Breakfast" have been replaced with the Ritz Brothers in "Kentucky Moonshine" and Robert Donat in "The Count of Monte Cristo."]



The older boy in this famous depression picture can joke 25 years later (right) about the “dirty ‘30’s”

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, Cimarron County, Okla., was a dust bowl, and farmers who no longer could take it bed with their families. One of the historic pictures of those dreadful times (above, left) was taken by Arthur Rothstein, then with the U.S. Resettlement Administration. It shows Arthur Coble and his sons Milton and Darrel on their Cimarron

“farm.” Cimarron County has changed since then. Although it still has dust storms, it is the richest county per capita in Oklahoma. Rothstein, who is now technical director of photography for LOOK, recently returned to Cimarron. He found the farm where he had photographed the Cobles in 1936. Arthur Coble, his

wife, their two sons and two daughters remained on their land through the 1990’s. Today, Arthur Coble is dead. Mrs. Coble has moved to another part of the county, and their four children are married. The two sons still live not far from the old homestead. Milton, now 31, works in a feed mill in Hartley, Texas, about 50 miles away, and Darrel, 28, is with the county highway department. Both now have boys the same age they were

when the early Rothstein picture was taken. In the photograph above, right, Milton is shown with his son Bill in almost exactly the same spot. Darrel vividly remembers life on the old farm: “Six of us in three rooms. During the storms, we’d eat in bed. Less dust.” Milton can talk with humor now about the “dirty ‘30s.” He recalls that the house did not have plumbing until 1947. “We took our Saturday baths in a gal-

vanized tub behind the kitchen stove, with walking water. You had to walk to get it.” The Cobles today are comfortable. But some of their neighbors, whose land has soared from 75 cents an acre to upwards of \$150, are rich. They have learned to protect their soil by modern methods, to keep it from blowing away. There will be droughts until the end of time. But another dust bowl? Not likely, these farmers will tell you.

END

LOOK magazine October 24, 1961, updated photo by Arthur Rothstein, Library of Congress, Courtesy of Bill Ganzel



Billboards and frame houses, Atlanta, GA, March 1936, by Walker Evans, Library of Congress



Houses and advertisements, Atlanta, GA, May 1938, updated by John Vachon, Library of Congress

ERROL MORRIS: It’s a different world. The movie posters have changed. In a photograph, you’re trapped in this one timeless instant of time. And when you break through that barrier, however you do it, whether it’s by taking a photograph of that same scene, whether it’s from the same tripod position or not, but of that same scene in such a way that you can record or you can register —

BILL GANZEL: — the change.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. The change, the impermanence of it, the awareness that it’s different, palpably different —

BILL GANZEL: You’re kicking off a number of different thoughts. I worked for Nebraska Public Television and learned how to be a documentary filmmaker. And so when I got into this project, and when I started thinking about this Look project there was a decision

point of, “How do I approach it?” Do I really want to do this as a still photography project? Or is this something that should be done on film or done on video now, obviously? And for me, two still photographs — rather than a still and a video image — has the permanence that you were talking about and the pairing of that, of those two moments, it has more power for me. And yet I want to augment that with the oral history interviews that I’m doing on videotape.

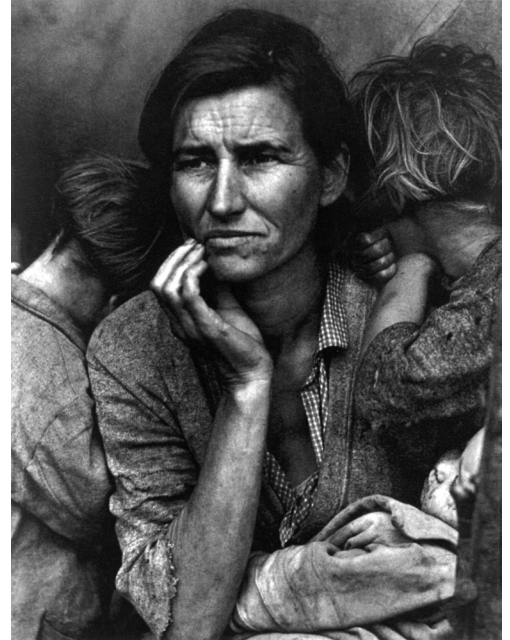
ERROL MORRIS: Were you surprised, going in and seeing the painting on the wall?

BILL GANZEL: To be honest, I don’t remember exactly. But I was obviously taken by it. Because that’s what I chose to photograph him in front of. So I don’t specifically remember being surprised by it. I must have been, if that makes sense.

ERROL MORRIS: Yeah. It reminds me that photography captures an idea, and that idea hovers behind him in your photograph.

BILL GANZEL: The other thing you kicked off, besides the film/video, video versus still thing is — I’m thinking about “Migrant Mother.” It’s as if, when I take my photograph up against the iconic depiction of desperation — I don’t know — it changes the meaning.

You know what I’m saying? It negates the desperation. Because here she is in a suburban backyard, which we’ve got to remember was not her backyard. That’s actually [her daughter] Katherine’s backyard. And they look fairly well off. And they were definitely much more comfortable than they were in the thirties. [The photograph is of Florence Thompson, who was identified as the Migrant Mother, shortly after Lange’s picture was taken, and her three daughters — the same three children who appear in the original photograph — Norma Rydlewski, in front, and Katherine McIntosh, on the left, and Ruby Sprague.]



Above, Library of Congress
Below, Bill Ganzel



But the other thing to remember . . . actually, the family told me this outside of the interview. At one point, they had bought Florence a suburban house as well. And she hated it. She went back to the trailer. And for me, that's really symbolic because she literally wanted to have wheels under her. This is purely conjecture on my part, but it seems to me the wheels under her are symbolic. "If the hard times come again, I can get up. I can move on. I can survive."

Bill Ganzel interviewed Florence Thompson about her life on the road in the 1930s.

FLORENCE THOMPSON: I left Oklahoma in 1925 and went to California. The Depression hit just about the time them girls' [her daughters'] dad died. I was 28 years old, and I had five kids and one on the way. You couldn't get no work and what you could, it was very hard and cheap. I'd leave home before daylight and come home after dark — grapes, 'taters, peas, whatever I was doing. Barely made enough each day to buy groceries that night. I picked cotton in Firebaugh, when that girl there was about two years old, I picked cotton in Firebaugh for 50 cents a hundred....

BILL GANZEL: How much could you pick in a day, then?

FLORENCE THOMPSON: I generally picked around 450, 500 [pounds of cotton every day]. I didn't even weigh a hundred pounds. I lived down there in Shafter, and I'd leave home before daylight and come in after dark. We just existed. Anyway, we lived. We survived, let's put it that way. I walked from what they called a Hoover camp ground right there at the bridge [in Bakersfield].[43] I walked from there to way down on First Street, and worked at a penny a dish down there for 50 cents a day and the leftovers. Yeah, they give me what was leftover to take home with me. Sometimes, I'd carry home two water buckets full. Well, [in 1936] we started from L.A. to Watsonville. And the timing chain broke on my car. And I had a guy to pull into this pea camp in Nipomo. I started to cook dinner for my kids, and all the little kids around the camp came in. "Can I have a bite? Can I have a bite?" And they was hungry, them people was. And I got my car fixed, and I was just getting ready to pull out when she [Dorothea Lange] come back and snapped my picture.[44]

ERROL MORRIS: All of these controversies that have swirled around the Rothstein photograph, did you address that with these people?

BILL GANZEL: The controversy that I'm assuming you're talking about is the skull photograph.

ERROL MORRIS: The skull photograph is one example. But there were similar questions raised about the picture of the dust storm, the picture of the farmer and the two children.

BILL GANZEL: To be honest with you, I'm not aware of that controversy. Who was raising those questions?

[Oddly, Ganzel's answer shocked me. I had become obsessed with the various controversies, the claims and counter-claims about the F.S.A. photographs. Had I forgotten that there was something more to these photographs than the endless and hopeless investigations into the intentions of the photographers, the issues of posing, and false captioning? That these were photographs of people caught in a moment of time?]

ERROL MORRIS: There's a book by James Curtis called "Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth," where he makes the claim that "Fleeing the Dust Storm" was posed or set up. That it was a fake photograph.

BILL GANZEL: Maybe Curtis is making the argument that at that particular time, or that particular day, it wasn't as windy or it wasn't as dusty or whatever —

ERROL MORRIS: Yes.

BILL GANZEL: There's no one that can deny that the dust was in the air. Darrell would have stories of what the dust was all about, or how the dust affected them. For instance, when his dad got caught out in the dust storm one time and couldn't find his way back because the dust was so thick, he finally came across one of their barbed wire fences. And he followed it back to the chicken coop and went inside the chicken coop to keep out of the dust. So whether that particular day was exactly as dusty as it looks like in the photograph, I'm not concerned with. It portrays a larger reality.

ERROL MORRIS: I agree.

BILL GANZEL: And the thing about the skull, I talked with Rothstein. O.k. He talks about moving it 10 feet. Yeah, he moved it. Big deal. He chalks it up to a miscaption.

ERROL MORRIS: These controversies persist in photography. And the more famous the photograph becomes the more likely people are to find fault with it, or to question it's "authenticity." [45] The Rothstein photograph is a great photograph. It's an iconic photograph. It's a photograph that will be around for a long, long, long time, and captures something so powerful that Coble's son had a facsimile of the photograph on the wall behind him. It is in a visual form the story of how we are taken over by images. [Photographs may be taken — but we are also taken in by them.] Rothstein created this great image. Are we saying that these aren't the real people, that that isn't his chicken coop, that that isn't his land, that he never was in a dust storm on the Plains?

BILL GANZEL: Right. For me to be able to go back and talk to these guys and to actually hear those stories about what he experienced, to flesh out the story, that just became so powerful that I felt like I had to do that. There was a real dichotomy when I talked with him. On one hand, I expected him to tell me it was terrible times. And he did. One quote I discounted. He said, "We didn't know whether or not the world was going to come to an end." And I thought, wow, that's really hyperbole. I don't think I'm going to include that. But then I read "The Worst Hard Time," and Timothy Egan wrote, "This was the first time that anybody had experienced that drought or these dust storms. And so people did not know whether the world was going to end." I realized I had other people in interviews who were saying the same thing. [46]

ERROL MORRIS: Would you describe your project as an attempt to get inside of a photograph?

BILL GANZEL: I would say it slightly differently. I would say "go behind the photograph," or "to extend the photograph."

ERROL MORRIS: To put it in history, to uncover an unseen context?

BILL GANZEL: Absolutely.

Bill Ganzel and James Curtis see Rothstein's dust storm in radically different ways. Is one right? The other wrong? I don't think so. Their views show the many different ways that a photograph can be seen. The different functions it serves. A photograph can display evidence from a patch of reality it records, but also leaves a strange footprint. An impression of an instantly lost past around which memories collect. For whatever reason, I am thinking of the myth of "Orpheus." The attempt to bring the dead back into the world of the living. But in "Orpheus," there is a warning. In journeying to the underworld, Orpheus must walk in front of Eurydice and never look back. Eternally trapped in the present, we are doomed to perpetually walk "in front" of the past.

A dust storm can be real or imagined. In one sense, it matters whether the storm is real; in another, all that matters is the image which extends through time, the memory of the storm. In the '30s it was a plea for help; now it is a story of triumph over adversity. We see the father and his two sons hunkered down, heading towards the chicken coop. It is an image that defines the boy, his brother and his father. It becomes part of how he sees himself and his family. It becomes his connection with a father who is no longer alive. It is not just that day that is captured in the photograph, it is how he has come to see his childhood. And how we have come to see an entire era. It brings time forward, but also compresses it, collapses it into one moment. It is the idea that the photograph captures that endures.

EPILOGUE

Rothstein, Lange and Evans have been accused of posing their photographs, in short, of manipulating them to some end. And yet all photographs are posed. There is no such thing as pure documentary photography. The problem is not in what any of them have done, but in our misunderstanding of photography. No crimes were committed by the F.S.A. photographers. They labored as employees of an organization dedicated to providing propaganda for the Roosevelt administration. And they created some of the greatest photographs in American history. Photographs can be works of art, bearers of evidence, and a connection with the past for individuals, families and society as a whole. It should not be lost on any of us that these controversies are still with us. The Photoshop alteration of a photograph "documenting" the launching of Iranian missiles, the cropping of a Christmas get-together at the Cheney ranch. These are just the latest iterations. In 1936, Roosevelt was reelected in a contentious election. Photography played a controversial role, reminding us that wherever there are intense disagreements, particularly political disagreements, there will be disagreements about photography, as well.

FURTHER READING

James Agee and Walker Evans, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." The book that started it all.

James Curtis, "Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth." A revisionist history of F.S.A. photography, particularly the iconic photographs of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and Arthur Rothstein.

Bill Ganzel, "Dust Bowl Descent." A romantic attempt to reconnect the iconic F.S.A. photographs to the people in them. [University of Nebraska Press, 1984.]

Mark Klett, Rebecca Solnit and Byron Wolfe, "Yosemite in Time: Ice Ages, Tree Clocks, Ghost Rivers."

Erling Larsen, "James Agee." A short but incredibly informative study of Agee's writings.

Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, "And Their Children After Them." A return to the families of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," 50 years later.

William Stott, "Documentary Expression and Thirties America." The definitive appraisal of F.S.A. photography within the context of 30s America.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the various archives that provided photographs and text: the Library of Congress; the James Agee Papers at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville; and the Walker Evans Archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ann Petrone researched most of the material and uncovered the multiple versions of the mantel photograph. Charles Silver and Julie Fischer read many drafts and made valuable suggestions. Dan Mooney designed and produced the graphics. I would also like to thank James Curtis, William Stott and Bill Ganzel for their interviews and the help they have given me. There has been an extraordinary number of books and articles written about the F.S.A. photographers and about James Agee. This essay cannot hope to be any sort of definitive account. All I can do is to explore some of the issues raised by these writers and photographers. But it is my underlying premise that many of the issues in contemporary photojournalism and photography can be found here.

FOOTNOTES

41: Mark Klett, "Third Views, Second Sights, A Rephotographic Survey of the American West," Museum of New Mexico Press (2004)

42: The caption below Look Magazine's side-by-side photograph reads: The older boy in this famous depression picture can joke 25 years later (right) about the "dirty '30's." Twenty-five years ago, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, was a dust bowl, and farmers who no longer could take it fled with their families. One of the historic pictures of those dreadful times (above, left) was taken by Arthur Rothstein, then with the U.S. Resettlement Administration. It shows Arthur Coble and his sons Milton and Darrel on their Cimarron "farm." Cimarron County has changed since then. Although it still has dust storms, it is the richest county per capita in Oklahoma. Rothstein, who is now technical director of photography for Look, recently returned to Cimarron. He found the farm where he had photographed the Cobles in 1936. Arthur Coble, his wife, their two sons and daughters remained on their land through the 1930's. Today, Arthur Coble is dead. Mrs. Coble has moved to another part of the county, and their four children are married. The two sons still live not far from the old homestead. Milton, now 31, works in a feed mill in Hartley, Texas, about 50 miles away, and Darrel, 26, is with the county highway department. Both now have boys the same age they were when the early Rothstein picture was taken. In the photograph above, right, Milton is shown with his son Bill in almost exactly the same spot. Darrel vividly remembers life on the old farm: 'Six of us in three rooms. During the storms, we'd eat in bed. Less dust.' Milton call talk with humor now about the 'dirty '30's.' He recalls that the house did not have plumbing until 1947. 'We took our Saturday baths in a galvanized tub behind the kitchen stove, with walking water. You had to walk to get it.' The Cobles today are comfortable. But some of their neighbors, whose land has soared from 75 cents an acre to upwards of \$150, are rich. They have learned to protect their soil by modern methods, to keep it from blowing away. There will be droughts until the end of time. But another dust bowl? Not likely, these farmers will tell you.

43: The bridge in Bakersfield is described in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath."

44 A print of "Migrant Mother" by Dorothea Lange was recently sold by Christie's for \$86,500.

45: You see it with the Robert Capa, photograph "Fallen Soldier." You see it with the Fenton photograph "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," and the Rosenthal photograph "The Raising of the Flag on Mt. Suribachi." The photographers have been accused of posing these photographs.

46: Timothy Egan, "The Worst Hard Time," New York (2006) "...it seemed on many days like a curtain was being drawn across a vast stage at world's end. The land convulsed in a way that had never been seen before..." The frontispiece of Egan's National Book Award-winning account of the Dust Bowl of the '30s includes Rothstein's photograph "Fleeing a Dust Storm."