



HISTORY STORIES

The Real Story Behind the 'Migrant Mother' in the Great Depression-Era Photo

Uncovering the woman behind Dorothea Lange's famous Depression-era photograph.

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From the New York Public Library

It's one of the most iconic photos in American history. A woman in ragged clothing holds a baby as two more children huddle close, hiding their faces behind her shoulders. The mother squints into the distance, one hand lifted to her mouth and anxiety etched deep in the lines on her face.

From the moment it first appeared in the pages of a San Francisco newspaper in March 1936, the image known as "Migrant Mother" came to symbolize the hunger, poverty and hopelessness endured by so many Americans during the [Great Depression](#). The photographer Dorothea Lange had taken the shot, along with a series of others, days earlier in a camp of migrant farm workers in Nipomo, California.

Lange was working for the federal government's Resettlement Administration—later the Farm Security Administration (FSA)—the [New Deal](#)-era agency created to help struggling farm workers. She and other [FSA photographers](#) would [take nearly 80,000 photographs for the organization](#) between 1935 to 1944, helping wake up many Americans to the desperate plight of thousands of people displaced from the drought-ravaged region known as the [Dust Bowl](#).

How the Photo Was Taken

WATCH: The 'Migrant Mother' Photo

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet," Lange [told *Popular Photography* magazine in 1960](#). She had spotted a sign for the migrant workers' campsite driving north on Highway 101 through San Luis Obispo County, some 175 miles north of Los Angeles. Bad weather had destroyed the local pea crop, and the pickers were out of work, many of them on the brink of starvation.

Lange didn't ask the woman's name, or find out her history. She claimed the woman told her she was 32, that she and her children were living on frozen vegetables and birds the children had killed, and that she had just sold the tires from her car to buy food.

Soon after the photos were published in the *San Francisco News*, the U.S. government announced it was sending 20,000 pounds of food to the pea-pickers' campsite. But by the time it arrived, the still-anonymous woman and her family had moved on. Even as her image was widely reprinted and reproduced on everything from magazine covers to postage stamps, the "Migrant Mother" herself appeared to have vanished.

The Real 'Migrant Mother'

Then in 1978, a woman named Florence Owens Thompson wrote a letter to the editor of the *Modesto Bee* newspaper. She was the mother in the famous "Migrant Mother" photo, Thompson said—and she wanted to set the record straight.

In an Associated Press article that followed, titled "Woman Fighting Mad Over Famous Depression Photo," Thompson told a reporter that she felt "exploited" by Lange's portrait. As Geoffrey Dunn [wrote in the *San Luis Obispo New Times* in 2002](#), Thompson and her children disputed other details in Lange's account, and sought to dispel the image of themselves as stereotypical Dust Bowl refugees.

Born in Oklahoma, Thompson was actually a full-blooded Native American; both her parents were Cherokee. In the mid-1920s, she and her first husband, Cleo Owens, moved to California, where they found mill and farm work. Cleo died of tuberculosis in 1931, and Florence was left to support six children by picking cotton and other crops.

When Bill Ganzel, a photographer for Nebraska Public Television, [interviewed and photographed Thompson](#) in 1979, she told him that while a young mother, she typically picked around 450-500 pounds of cotton a day, leaving home before daylight and coming home after dark. "We just existed," she said. "We survived, let's put it that way."

When Lange found her in Nipomo that day in March 1936, she had two more children, and was living with a man named Jim Hill, the father of her infant daughter Norma. After their car broke down on the way to find work picking lettuce, the family had been forced to pull off into the pea-pickers' camp.

Two of Florence's older sons were in town when the iconic picture was taken, getting the car's radiator fixed. One of them, Troy Owens, flatly denied that his mother had sold their tires to buy food, as Lange had claimed. "I don't believe Dorothea Lange was lying, I just think she had one story mixed up with another," Troy [told Dunn](#). "Or she was borrowing to fill in what she didn't have."

Life After the Famous Photo

The family kept moving after Nipomo, following farm work from one place to another, and Florence would have three more children. After [World War II](#), she settled in Modesto, California and married George Thompson, a hospital administrator.

By 1983, five years after claiming her identity as the "Migrant Mother," Thompson was living alone in a trailer. She suffered from cancer and heart problems, and at one point her children had to solicit donations for her medical expenses. According to Dunn, thousands of letters poured in, along with more than \$35,000 in contributions.

Florence Owens Thompson died in September 1983, just after her 80th birthday, ending a life marked by economic hardship, maternal sacrifice and human dignity.

Even President [Ronald Reagan](#) offered his [condolences](#), writing that "Mrs. Thompson's passing represents the loss of an American who symbolizes strength and determination in the midst of the Great Depression."

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