Books

Review: "The Likes of Us"

America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration, by Stu Cohen. Edited by Peter Bacon Hales (David R. Godine).

By
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Dorothea Lange's March 1937 photo "Toward Los Angeles" (From "The Likes of Us," David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc.)

When we think about the Depression, the late critic Stu Cohen wrote in his introduction to *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security*

Administration, we think photographs: The despair of the California-bound farmer. The indifference of the gathering dust storm. The stoicism of the unemployed in the breadline. Over the course of the 1930s, America's finest photographers captured the toll of the Depression in tens of thousands of extraordinary images. Nearly all of these pictures were commissioned by the Historical Section of the federal government's Farm Security Administration (FSA); 175 of them are beautifully reproduced in this new book.

Assigning top photographers to report on the Depression for the FSA was the inspiration not of a photographer, but of Roy Stryker '24CC, an assistant in Columbia's department of economics. Stryker had been a student of economics professor Rexford Tugwell, one of the Columbia academics who had formed Roosevelt's brain trust in Washington, D.C. In 1935, Tugwell, by then an assistant secretary of agriculture, asked Stryker to work for him and to set up some kind of historical, sociological, and economic documentation service; the brief was that vague.

Stryker began hiring photographers. He started with Arthur Rothstein '35CC (whose photographs are not in this book), and soon signed up a team that included Carl Mydans, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Sheldon Dick, and Marion Post Wolcott. It was a dazzling group, whether or not Stryker knew it yet.

The icons of the FSA collection are familiar to everyone; thousands of photos were published in Life and the other emerging picture magazines of the day. What distinguishes this book, though, is the inclusion of so much unknown material from the photographers' famous shooting trips. The wonder of Stryker's group is not just the force of the photographs, but that the images, having served such powerful documentary roles in the 1930s, may be even more provocative today.

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