

EYE ON AMERICA

During the Great Depression, Dorothea Lange saw people hungry and in despair. She “told” their stories with her photos.

Characters

Prologue narrator

Dorothea Lange

Joan Nutzhorn, *Lange's mother*

Florence “Fronsie” Alstrom,
Lange's best friend

Maynard Dixon,
Lange's first husband

Martin Nutzhorn,
Lange's younger brother

*Thaddeus Kendall } *men in*
*Maxie Trent } *headline*

Paul Taylor,
college professor and activist

Ron Partridge,
17, Lange's assistant

*Debbie Nakamura,
13, U.S.-born daughter of
immigrants from Japan

Major Beasley, *U.S. Army officer*

Narrators A-E

Epilogue narrator

*indicates a fictional character.
All others were real people.

PROLOGUE

Prologue narrator: Few American photographers are as famous for their **iconic** images as Dorothea Lange. She had a gift for illuminating feelings as well as faces in her work. During the

Great Depression, Lange turned her camera on ordinary people caught up in one of the grimmest eras in the nation's history. Through her photos, she told stories—and revealed truths—to Americans *about* Americans.

SCENE 1

Narrator A: Our story begins with the birth of Dorothea Margaretta Nutzhorn on May 26, 1895, in Hoboken, New Jersey. At age 7, she gets polio, an infectious disease that attacks muscles, often causing physical deformity. (For the rest of her life, she walks with a limp.) When she is 10, her father abandons the family. Dorothea's mother works hard to support her two children. She wants her daughter to become a teacher, but Dorothea has other plans. In January 1918 . . .

Dorothea: Well, Mother, I guess this is goodbye.

Joan Nutzhorn: Why give up on teaching? There aren't many careers for a woman—especially one as fiercely independent as you.

Dorothea: Teaching doesn't suit me. I'm going to be a photographer.

Nutzhorn: What do you know about photography?

Dorothea: I've been working after school in Mr. Genthe's studio. I've learned a lot—and I'll keep on learning.

Narrator B: Lange and her best friend head out of town on a bus.

Florence “Fronsie” Alstrom: Freedom!

Dorothea: Yeah. Where we're going, nobody will know that our classmates called me Limpy.

Alstrom: Or that your father abandoned you.

Dorothea: That's why I'm using my mother's maiden name from now on. Goodbye, Hoboken. Goodbye, Dorothea Nutzhorn!

Alstrom: Hello, San Francisco—and Dorothea Lange, photographer!

SCENE 2

Narrator C: Lange feels at home in California. She opens a studio and becomes a successful portrait photographer. She meets and marries Maynard Dixon, a painter, and starts a family. But . . .

Maynard Dixon: I'm off to Arizona. Be back in a few weeks.

Dorothea Lange: You always say that. But often it turns into months! How am I supposed to take care of the kids *and* my studio business?



WHITE ANGEL BREADLINE
San Francisco, California, 1932.

Dixon: I make good money selling my paintings of the Southwest. It's my job—and my life.

Lange: Well, photography is *my* job and *my* life.

Dixon: Men work. Women stay home. That's how it's always been. I didn't make the rules.

Lange: You don't have to be a slave to them, either. Nor do I!

Narrator D: With help from friends, and sometimes a boarding school for the children, Lange keeps her portrait business going.

SCENE 3

Narrator E: Then comes the stock market crash of October 1929. The nation is plunged into the Great Depression. By 1932, nearly 25 percent of Americans are out of work. One day that year, Lange's brother drops by her studio.

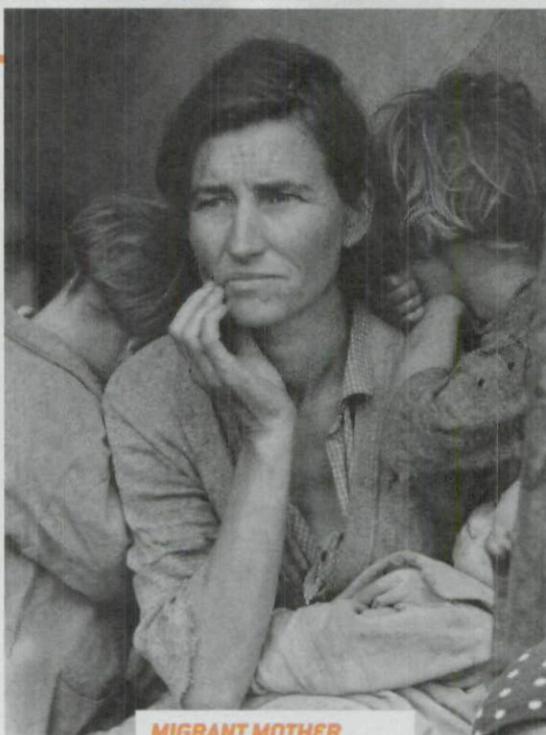
Martin Nutzhorn: How's business?

Lange: Awful. Portraits are a luxury that few people can afford.

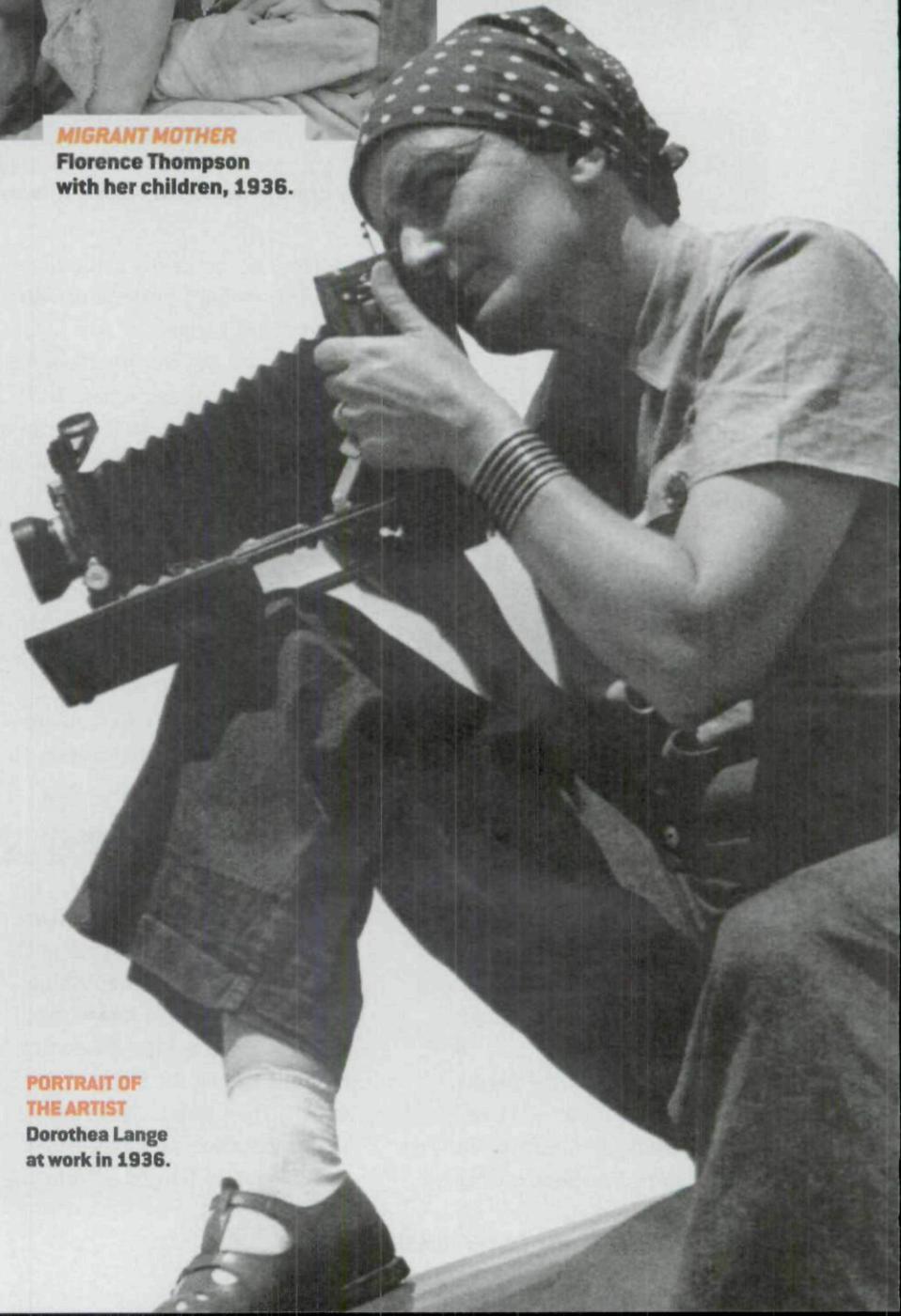
Martin Nutzhorn: It's bad everywhere. I had to walk by a long breadline to get here.

Lange: Yes, I see it from my window. A woman known as the White Angel runs it. It's sad seeing so many people jobless

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MIGRANT MOTHER
Florence Thompson
with her children, 1936.



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST
Dorothea Lange
at work in 1936.

Words to Know

- **Dust Bowl** (*n*): Great Plains areas devastated by severe drought from 1931 to the early 1940s.
- **Great Depression** (*n*): a period of severe economic decline that affected much of the world in the decade after the stock market crash of 1929.
- **iconic** (*adj*): powerfully symbolic; representative of a broader or larger idea.
- **saboteur** (*sah-buh-TUR*) (*n*): an enemy agent who participates in secret acts of destruction.



SORROW AND ISOLATION, 1942 Left: Evacuees of Japanese ancestry enter a camp in California. Above: A Japanese internment camp, also in California.

Web Watch: Lange at Work
www.loc.gov/exhibits/wcf/wcf0013.html

and hungry. I wish I could do something.

Narrator A: Suddenly, Lange grabs her camera.

Lange: People need to know what's going on here!

Narrator B: The two go down to the breadline. Lange doesn't want to intrude, but the men don't mind the sympathetic woman with a camera.

Lange (*to a man in the breadline*): What did you do before the Depression?

Thaddeus Kendall: I owned a department store. We had a beautiful home, two cars, a chauffeur. We even had—

Maxie Trent: Yeah, well, that's all gone now, pal. Here we are, you and me, on the same ground.

Lange: What did you do?

Trent: I was a plumber. Sinks still get clogged, but nobody can afford to hire me. My kids are hungry.

Kendall: Mine too.

Narrator C: One of the photos Lange takes that day—*White Angel Breadline*—becomes her first famous shot. Her photos of the

jobless and homeless catch the eye of an economics professor, who approaches Lange.

Paul Taylor: I'm studying how people cope in tough times. You say more in one photo than I can in pages of analysis. Will you help me?

Lange: How?

Taylor: Come on my field trips. Shoot whatever catches your eye. With your photos illustrating my reports, we can get the attention of people who have the power to help those in need.

Narrator D: Lange takes the job—and discovers her true calling. Her life is changed in the process.

SCENE 4

Narrator E: By 1935, Lange has divorced Dixon and married Taylor. The President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, has been establishing a series of programs, known as the New Deal, to help Americans suffering during the Depression and the **Dust Bowl**. Lange and Taylor work for the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm

Security Administration). They document the harsh lives of farmers and other people in hard-hit rural areas. A young assistant helps with Lange's bulky camera and gear.

Ron Partridge: Your photos amaze me. The way people gaze at the camera seems painfully intimate.

Lange: I don't barge in, telling them what to do. I take my time. I talk with them, learn a little about their lives. I let the kids play with my camera. Then I step back. They soon forget about me and go back about their daily lives. Then I shoot.

Narrator A: Between 1935 and 1939, Lange takes some of her most famous photos, including the one known as *Migrant Mother*.

Narrator B: On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bomb a U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The next day, the U.S. enters World War II. Some Americans, especially on the West Coast, panic, fearing further attacks. On February 19,

SCENE 5

Narrator B: On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bomb a U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The next day, the U.S. enters World War II. Some Americans, especially on the West Coast, panic, fearing further attacks. On February 19,



ONE MAN'S DESPAIR A migrant Mexican field worker and child in front of their home on the edge of a frozen pea field in California's Imperial Valley, 1937.

1942, President Roosevelt signs Executive Order 9066. It authorizes the U.S. military to round up Japanese-Americans and put them in internment [confinement] camps.

Taylor: Two thirds of the people being rounded up are U.S. citizens! Does anyone really think they are spies and **saboteurs**?

Lange: I've been photographing families being evacuated. They have to leave behind everything except what they can fit in a suitcase.

Narrator C: Lange is hired by another federal agency, the War Relocation Authority, and sent to the camps. At one, called Manzanar . . .

Lange: What is life like here?

Debbie Nakamura: It's horrible! I miss my school and my friends. One day, life was normal. The next, they rounded us up, put us on buses, and sent us here. Thousands of people are crammed into cabins in the middle of a desert, surrounded by barbed-wire fences and armed guards. My brother is in the U.S. Army, yet we are treated like criminals.

Lange: My job is to document life in the internment camps.

Debbie: Good! If people see what it's really like, maybe they'll help get us out of here.

Narrator D: The military objects to Lange's picture-taking. Some officials try to stop her.

Major Beasley: There's a war going on, lady. Photos like yours could undermine the war effort.

Lange: The people in these camps want their stories told, and I intend to tell them. The Constitution frowns on locking up citizens who haven't been found guilty of a crime.

Narrator E: Lange's photos expose the injustice of the camps. But Lange doesn't own the photos—the government does. It impounds [seizes and withholds] them. The images aren't exhibited until 1972.

EPILOGUE

Epilogue narrator: For as long as her health permitted, Lange kept taking pictures. For a while, she lived abroad, photographing people in South America, Asia,

and the Middle East. She died in San Francisco on October 11, 1965.

A year earlier, Lange told an interviewer about the day that had changed her life—photographing the San Francisco headline. "I was still sort of aware that there was a very large world out there that I had not entered too well, and I decided I'd better," she said. "I never had any sense [of] making a career out of it. It was more a sense of personal commitment."

Thanks to that commitment, we now have a collection of photographs that shows how we lived and survived as a nation at a crucial time in American history.

—Kathy Wilmore

➔ Think About It

1. What events in Lange's childhood helped shape her career?
2. If you wanted to comment on an injustice, how would you do so—through words, photos, or some other medium? Explain.