



**Walker Evans**  
**1937**

Walker Evans (1903-1975) was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. His elegant, crystal-clear photographs and articulate publications have inspired several generations of artists. The progenitor of the documentary tradition in American photography, for fifty years from the late

1920s to the early 1970s, Evans recorded the American scene with the nuance of a poet and the precision of a surgeon, creating an encyclopedic visual catalogue of modern America in the making.

Born in 1903 in St. Louis, Missouri, Evans dabbled with painting as a child, collected picture postcards, and made snapshots of his family and friends with a small Kodak camera. After a year at Williams College, a small private liberal arts college in Williamstown, Massachusetts, he quit school and moved to New York City, finding work in bookstores. In 1927, after a year in Paris writing short stories and nonfiction essays, Evans returned to New York intent on becoming a writer. However, he also took up the camera and gradually redirected his aesthetic impulses into the medium of photography.

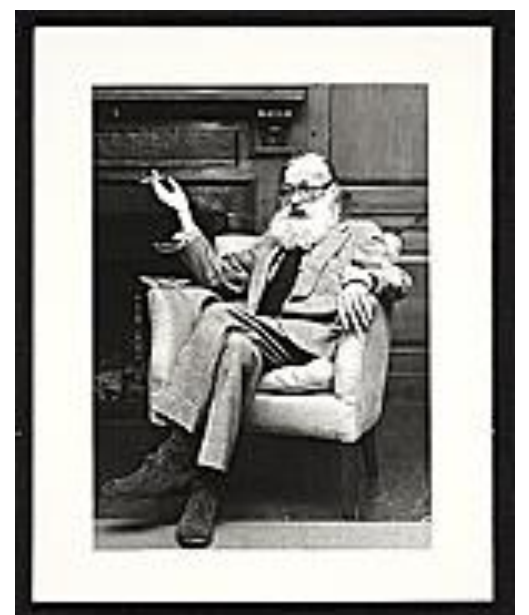
In June 1935, he accepted a job from the U.S. Department of the Interior to photograph a government-built resettlement community of unemployed coal miners in West Virginia. This turned into a full-time position as



Rural church in South, 1936

an "information specialist" in the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farm Security Administration, one of President Roosevelt's New Deal agencies. Under the direction of Roy Stryker, the FSA photographers were assigned to document small-town life and to demonstrate how the federal government was attempting to improve the lot of rural communities during the Depression. Evans, however, worked with little concern for the ideological agenda or Stryker's suggested itineraries, and instead answered a personal need to distill the essence of American life from the simple and the ordinary. His photographs of roadside architecture, rural churches, small-town barbers, and cemeteries reveal a deep respect for the neglected traditions of the common man and secured his reputation as America's preeminent documentarian. From their first appearance in magazines and books in the late 1930s, these direct, iconic images entered the public's collective consciousness, and are deeply embedded in the nation's visual history of the Great Depression.

In the summer of 1936, Evans took a leave of absence from the Resettlement Administration to travel to the South with his friend, the writer James Agee, who had been assigned to write an article on tenant farmers by *Fortune* magazine; Evans was to be the photographer. Although the magazine ultimately rejected Agee's long text about three families in Alabama, what in time emerged from the collaboration was *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a lyric journey to the limits of direct observation. Evans' photographs are stunningly honest representations of the faces, bedrooms, and clothing of individual farmers living on a dry hillside north of Greensboro, Alabama. As a series, they seem to have elucidated the whole tragedy of the Great Depression — individually, they are intimate, transcendent, and enigmatic.



**Walker Evans, 1973**