

## Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs



### Background and Scope of the Color Photographs Collection

Between 1939 and 1943, photographers working for the U.S. government's Farm Security Administration (FSA) and later the Office of War Information (OWI) created approximately 1,600 color photographs depicting life in the United States, including Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Largely forgotten until the mid-1970's when the collection resurfaced in the Library of Congress archives (the photographs had been misfiled sometime after they were transferred to the Library in 1944), the color photographs document the latter period of President Roosevelt's New Deal, an ambitious series of government programs designed to address the brutal effects of the Great Depression on the social and economic fabric of 1930's America. While the Library's archived collection of more than 171,000 black-and-white photographs black-and-white Depression-era photographs is more familiar and more often reproduced, the color images, taken within three years of the invention of Kodachrome film in 1935, are striking for their rich, saturated colors, and are some of the only color photographs taken of the effects of the Great Depression on America's rural and small town populations.



Backyard of tenant farmer's home - Mileston, Mississippi, September 1939.

The color photographs focus on rural areas and farm labor during the latter part of the Great Depression, as well as aspects of World War II mobilization, including factories, railroads, aviation training, and women working as part of the WWII war effort, and were intended as a kind of inspirational portrait of America in the face economic troubles and the growing wartime fears. In response to accusations that the New Deal programs were too extreme in their reshaping of economic and social policy, Roy Stryker, who directed both black-and-white and color photography projects at the FSA—OWI, encouraged his photographers to provide supporting evidence for the necessity and purpose of government's role in ensuring the public's welfare after the near collapse of the country's financial system. The emphasis on both technical and formal invention in these color photographs underscores the promise of technology and order in the face of the social and economic instability of the period.

Most of the color photographs in the collection are comprised of original 35-mm Kodachrome slides, and color transparencies in sizes up to 4x5-inches. During "A Symposium with FSA Photographers" held in January 1979 at the Amarillo Museum of Art in Amarillo TX, Arthur Rothstein – the first Historical Section photographer hired by Roy Stryker in 1935 – was interviewed regarding the topic of color photography at the FSA Historical Section. Rothstein explained that the invention and development of 35-mm Kodachrome film by Kodak did not occur until 1935. It was therefore not really possible for the FSA photographers to use it until 1936-1937. Rothstein, as did many of the other FSA photographers, developed his own B&W sheet film each night in the bathroom of his hotel room while out on an assignment in order to see the results of each day's work. However, the photographers were not able to develop the color Kodachrome film themselves, which in the 1930s had to be sent to Kodak in Rochester NY for processing. The exposed color film was first sent to the FSA office in Washington D.C., which was forwarded to Kodak; it then took an additional two weeks to get the negatives returned back to the FSA office. The photographers would not see the results of their color photography for perhaps a month or two, long after they had left the area of their photography assignment. Jack Delano, another of the FSA photographers, added that the color Kodachrome film had a slow film speed of only ASA 12, making it useful for only outside photography. An additional factor in its less frequent use during the FSA—OWI period is that magazines and newspapers were not printing color at that time.



Working on the nose section of a B-17 bomber – October 1942

For further discussion of the FSA/OWI color photography, see the Library of Congress online exhibit, "Bound for Glory" at: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bound-for-glory/exhibition-items.html>. The Library of Congress is also sharing the FSA/OWI Color Photographs collection on Flickr, where Flickr community members can add comments, notes, and tags. The direct link is as follows: [https://www.flickr.com/photos/library\\_of\\_congress/sets/72157603671370361/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/sets/72157603671370361/).

Website: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsac/>

Credits: Adapted from The Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, "Color Photographs from the New Deal (1939-1943)" <http://www.carriagetrade.org/Social-PhotographyII/>; <http://blogs.denverpost.com/captured/2010/07/26/capture-america-in-color-from-1939-1943/2363/>.