



Russell Lee
1942

Russell Lee (1903-1986) was born in Ottawa, Illinois. His parents' divorce, the death of his mother, and supervision by three successive guardians created an unsettled childhood for Lee. In 1917 he was sent to Culver Military Academy (CMA) in Indiana, which provided some stability in his life. He later enrolled at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, graduating in 1925 with a degree in chemical engineering, and was hired at Certainteed Products Company in Marseilles, Illinois.

In 1927 Lee married Doris Emrick, known as one of the most successful female artists of the Great Depression era. Lee became so bored with his job that he resigned to pursue painting. After moving to San Francisco in 1929, the Lees resettled a year later in an artists

colony in Woodstock, New York. Lee subsequently became increasingly frustrated with his limitations as a painter. In 1935, at the suggestion of a friend, he bought his first camera and his enthusiasm for photography quickly grew. He explored the technical aspects of the craft, experimenting with developing chemicals, exposure speeds, and flash photography techniques.

Lee began taking documentary photographs in Woodstock in 1935 and went to Pennsylvania to photograph bootleg coal miners. The winter of 1935 found him in New York City documenting the poor and their living conditions. In 1936, Lee joined the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farm Security Administration, where he worked under the creative supervision of Roy Stryker, director of photographic projects. His colleagues included Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans, and Carl Mydans. During his 6 years with FSA, Lee traveled extensively throughout the United States, documenting life in rural and urban communities. He developed a flash technique that enabled him to take innovative and candid interior photographs. He also specialized in taking pictures in series, most notably those shot in Pie Town, New Mexico, and San Augustine, Texas.



Supper by lamplight, 1940

The long periods away from his wife while working for the FSA, sometimes 6 months in length, contributed to their divorce in 1938. On assignment in New Orleans the same year, he met Jean Smith, a Dallas journalist. They began working together and eventually married. Between 1949 and 1962, Lee conducted a photographic workshop at the University of Missouri. In 1965, The University of Texas at Austin presented an exhibition of Lee's photographs and he was subsequently invited to join the university's art faculty as an instructor in photography. He taught until his retirement in 1973.



Russell Lee, January 1979
Amarillo Museum of Art