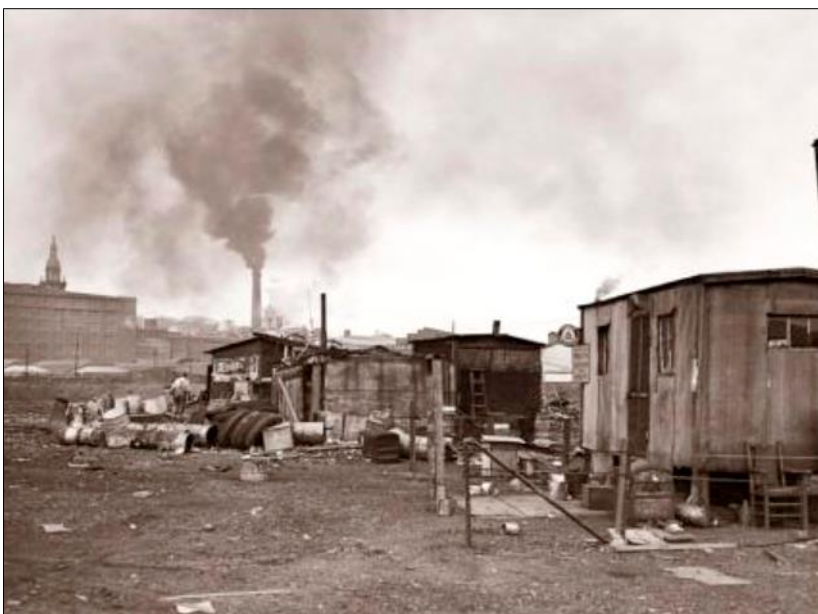


John Vachon
1942

John Vachon (1914-1975) traveled the world as a professional photographer, but the St. Paul native's work was always shaped by his Midwestern upbringing. He is most remembered for his photographs for the Farm Security Administration and *Look* magazine. His photos juxtaposed the rich and the poor, society's promise and its compromises.

At age 21, Vachon moved to Washington, D.C. after receiving a fellowship to attend Catholic University of America for graduate school. He began studying English literature, but he was forced to leave school because of his drinking. Vachon was very shy, had a troubled personal life, and his friends and family worried about his alcoholism. Rather than moving back to St. Paul and telling his parents what had happened, Vachon looked for work in Washington. In 1937 he found a temporary job working as an assistant messenger for the FSA Historical Section photographic project, headed by Roy Stryker, which was documenting difficult living conditions in rural regions of the United States.

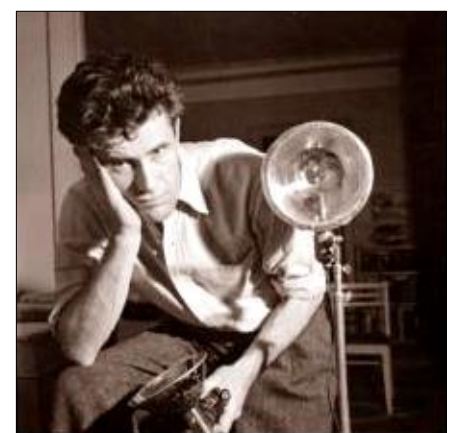
Vachon was soon promoted to file clerk, but Stryker had bigger hopes for him yet. He lent Vachon a camera and encouraged him to take photos around Washington. Vachon became passionately interested in photography. Vachon's job as a file clerk had allowed him explicit access to the thousands of photographs they had produced, and he prided himself on the highly organized archival system he established to file and retrieve these images. Vachon was especially drawn to the Walker Evans photographs of small-town America, and his earlier photographs were strongly influenced by Evans. But Vachon belonged to the 'second generation' of FSA photographers, whose emphasis was by then less focused on rural deprivation, and more on urban conditions and the gradual encroachment of World War II on the American people.



Occupied shacks at the edge of the city dump, Dubuque - April 1940

In 1938, Stryker sent Vachon on his first long trip. Vachon recalled this experience in Omaha, Nebraska as being the moment he became a true photographer. Stryker continued sending Vachon on longer photo trips, although he did not acquire the title of junior photographer until 1940. Vachon soon graduated to a 35mm Leica camera and began taking short photographic trips to the Midwest. As one of these assignments, Vachon came to Dubuque, Iowa in April of 1940, to document urban conditions. He took nearly 300 photographs in the area, including a few in East Dubuque, Illinois in Jo Daviess County on his way to Dubuque. Vachon's Dubuque series photographs are a permanent collection of the Dubuque Museum of Art, and a public showing of these photographs was held at the Museum during September 10, 2009 — February 21, 2010.

In 1946, Vachon took a job working for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, where he photographed postwar conditions in Poland, and was shaken by the violence he witnessed. In 1947, Vachon was offered a job as a staff photographer for *Look* magazine. *Look* was a popular weekly photo magazine that started in 1937. It competed with magazines like *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, although it lacked the professional style of those publications. Vachon worked for *Look* until 1971.



John Vachon at work