Same People, Same Time, 
Same Place: Contrasting Images of 
Destitute Ozark Mountaineers 
during the Great Depression

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IN AUGUST 1935, ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN traveled through the hills of 
north central and northwestern Arkansas taking pictures of rural pov-
erty for the federal Resettlement Administration (RA)—later the Farm 
Security Administration (FSA).1 Among his better-known images is 
“Wife and child of a sharecropper, Washington County” (Figure 1; all 
photos discussed here are assembled at the end of the article). It is a 
candid photo of a woman and young child standing in the darkened 
doorway of the family’s cabin. The woman’s attention is directed to 
someone out of the frame, and she seems completely unaware of the 
photographer.

The Library of Congress archive of FSA photos includes approxi-
mately 120 photos taken by Rothstein and Ben Shahn in the Arkansas 
Ozarks in the late summer and fall of 1935. A number of these photos

1The Farm Security Administration’s celebrated photographic unit began as a 
project of the Resettlement Administration. It was charged with facilitating the work 
of regional officers, educating clients about the nature of the RA’s efforts to relieve 
rural poverty, and providing supportive publicity for programs that were inherently 
controversial and whose costs were likely borne by urban taxpayers. The program was 
administered nationally through twelve regions; Arkansas was in Region VI. Stuart 
Kidd, Farm Security Administration Photography, the Rural South, and the Dynamics 

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are among the most familiar of the FSA collection of thousands of images taken by several dozen photographers.²

What Rothstein and Shahn likely did not know, however, is that there was another photographer in the same area that year, also taking pictures of destitute Ozark farmers. It was most likely Ernest Nicholson, a county rehabilitation caseworker based in Boone County, Arkansas, who took nearly 100 photographs of relief clients in 1935 showing their families and living conditions. An example is “A Client’s New Home” (Figure 2), which, like Rothstein’s picture, is of a woman with her children. As in the Rothstein picture, the woman and children look impoverished; their clothing is shabby and their house a roughly built shelter of mismatched boards, propped up on a section of a log. These photos are held at the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History in Springdale, Arkansas, in the Katy McCoy Collection. They are snapshot-size pictures originally mounted in an album along with extensive captions. As such, they are remarkable historical documents of the lives of the poorest Arkansans in Boone and Newton Counties during the Great Depression. But they offer some striking contrasts to the more familiar RA/FSA images. Ernest Nicholson could not have been more different from Rothstein and Shahn, though he photographed essentially the same subjects they did—destitute Arkansas farmers and their living conditions.

The RA/FSA photos have become our standard for visualizing extreme rural poverty in the 1930s. Under the direction of Roy Stryker from 1935 to 1943, the project established a certain documentary aesthetic to serve the purposes of the Resettlement Administration and other federal relief programs.³ Since the 1960s and 1970s, the photos have been intensely studied and analyzed. Though they were not as widely published in the 1930s as may be assumed, even then their superior aesthetic quality was recognized by contemporaries such as Edward Steichen, who described them in 1939 as “the most remarkable

²The FSA collection, housed in the Library of Congress, is reputed to be the largest documentary photography project ever. It includes nearly a quarter million images taken by photographers now considered to be among the best of the twentieth century, including Jack Delano, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Gordon Parks, John Vachon, Dorothea Lange, and Marion Post Wolcott. “Farm Security Administration,” University Libraries, University of Louisville, louisville.libguides.com (accessed March 23, 2011).

³Roy E. Stryker was an economics instructor at Columbia University in New York in 1935 when Rexford Tugwell brought him into the Resettlement Administration. He directed the Historic Division of the RA, which became the Farm Security Administration in 1937. Stryker’s papers are housed in the University of Louisville Photographic Archives. “Roy Emerson Stryker (1893-1975),” University Libraries, University of Louisville, louisville.libguides.com (accessed March 23, 2011).
human documents that were ever rendered in pictures.” They have now, after decades, achieved iconic status, according to some scholars. But, others have described the photos as “propaganda,” ideological expressions of a political agenda promulgated by the federal government.4

In 1935, however, the RA/FSA photography project was just beginning, and was no doubt little known in Arkansas. That its photographers and a local relief caseworker should be taking pictures of the same population in the same region during the same year is a remarkable coincidence that creates a rich visual record of that time and place.

In studying historical photographs, cultural historian Alan Trachtenberg cautioned against the tendency to “see what one wants to see” in such photos, without careful consideration of factors such as the photographers’ purpose and an understanding of photographic language.5 The RA/FSA and Nicholson sets of photos present a unique opportunity to explore their shared content but also the differences in their presentation of that content. The purpose of this article is to go beyond seeing only what is apparent in two sets of photographs of Depression-era Arkansas to what is revealed by examining their “photographic meanings.”

A methodical approach to interpreting expressive images from another era can be traced to art and art history scholarship. The analytical systems rooted there have been further developed through the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, visual cultural studies, and journalism and media studies. The unifying focus has been an interest in understanding how visual images—including photographs—were produced, how they convey meaning, how to read elements of an image


5Alan Trachtenberg, Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 93.
and their relationships and formal qualities, and how they all combine to create a message.\textsuperscript{6}

A method for this kind of examination was devised by photo historian David Perlmutter to determine \textquote{\textquotesingle\textquotesingle primary historical meanings\textquotesingle\textquotesingle; that is, meanings associated with an image by those who created it.\textquotesingle\textquotesingle His method is adapted here in studying these two photo collections from five perspectives: (1) the photographers and their intentions; (2) the photo captions; (3) the content of the pictures; (4) their formal design qualities; and (5) the camera technology used. Knowing who the photographers were and something about their personal histories provides contextual information not offered in the photos, as do photo captions and labels. A basic content analysis of the images will account for the elements they emphasize. The formal design qualities involve how framing, camera angle, composition, lighting, and other techniques are used to present content in a certain fashion. The cameras used are significant for how they aid or limit the photographers in capturing a subject.

\textit{The Photographers}

Of the three photographers, only Ernest Nicholson was from Arkansas. Born in 1902, Nicholson was raised in Harrison, the county seat of Boone County. Always a standout in high school and later at the Col-


\textsuperscript{7}David Perlmutter, \textit{\textquoteright\textquoteright Differences between Visual and Written Texts: The Elements of Meaning in Historical Images\textquoteright\textquoteright, \textit{Historical Methods} 27 (Fall 1994): 169, 173-175.
lege of the Ozarks in Clarksville, he was even a candidate for a Rhodes scholarship in 1926. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Nicholson worked as a public school teacher, a superintendent in a small school system, and a Presbyterian pastor. In the 1940s and 1950s, he served as a senator in the Arkansas state legislature and later became a respected businessman in Harrison.\(^8\) Though Nicholson is nowhere specifically identified as having taken the photos in the McCoy Collection, circumstantial evidence suggests he was. The photos in this collection were found in an album in his niece’s attic years after his death and that of his wife, and the couple had no children of their own. Several photos taken by Nicholson of Newton County schools are in the Bradley House Museum in Jasper, Arkansas.\(^9\)

More telling still is his employment during the Depression in a series of federal relief projects in Boone and Newton Counties. From 1933 to January 1936, he held the positions of “County Administrator” and “casework supervisor” for the Emergency Relief Administration (ERA), the state agency through which the New Deal’s Federal Emergency Relief Administration distributed aid to the impoverished and unemployed. For much of 1936, he worked as a foreman on several federally funded construction projects around Jasper. In November 1936, he was again hired as a social worker by the ERA.\(^10\)

According to a state report on relief and rehabilitation work, the 1934 Rural Rehabilitation Program in Arkansas provided that each county had an administrator whose duties were to coordinate all relief activities and supervise the county effort. As a county administrator, Nicholson would have handled applications for rural rehabilitation, investigating them to “determine eligibility and probability of successful rehabilitation.” He would then have presented

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\(^8\)John L. Fletcher, “Ernest Nicholson: Teachers Have a Problem,” *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), March 8, 1953, p. 5F; Jesse Lewis Russell, *Behind These Ozark Hills: History—Reminiscences—Traditions Featuring the Author’s Family* (New York: Hobson Book Press, 1947), 193. Files at the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History contain notes concerning interviews with various people about Ernest Nicholson and his wife, Opal. The notes are titled “Earnest [sic] and May Nicholson Research”; they are initialed “KH” and dated May 10, 2006. They include memories of several Harrison residents that Nicholson worked for a “rural relief program” during the Depression.

\(^9\)A description of the discovery of the photographs is found in a phone interview with Katy McCoy by an unnamed representative of the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History (May 10, 2006). Unpublished transcript, Katy McCoy Collection, Shiloh Museum of Ozark History. For information on the Bradley House Museum in Jasper, see “Earnest [sic] and May Nicholson Research” notes at the Shiloh Museum.

\(^10\)Civilian Personnel Records for Ernest Nicholson. These records include documents such as applications for employment, timesheets, and assignment slips involving employment with FERA and WPA from 1934 to 1939. National Personnel Records Center, Civilian Personnel Records, St. Louis, MO.
them to the county committee for approval. Unfortunately, no records of such presentations appear to have survived. However, it is notable that the captions for the Nicholson photographs repeatedly refer to the efforts of a caseworker in commenting on the possibilities for improvements in the conditions of clients and offer comments on their lives.

Arthur Rothstein and Ben Shahn came to Arkansas from New York. Rothstein was the first photographer hired by Roy Stryker for the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration; Ben Shahn, though hired as a muralist, became another of the early RA/FSA photographers. They both helped to develop the visual interpretation of the agency’s mission, which was not simply to relieve rural poverty in the short term but more securely establish tenant farmers and small proprietors on the land.

Rothstein had developed an interest in photography while in high school. His goal of attending medical school was waylaid by the Depression, and he continued his photography while attending Columbia University. There he met Roy Stryker. Later in life, Rothstein recalled the FSA project as having a “missionary sense of dedication. . . of making the world a better place to live in.” He thought of the photos he took as compiling a visual record of conditions in the U.S. during the Depression. As such, it was important to him to capture “a picture that had meaning.” He felt a considerable responsibility toward those who might see the photos: “[A] photographer has to make pictures that are honest and truthful.” To address the shyness people felt around him as a photographer, he developed a technique he called the “unobtrusive camera,” in which he became part of the environment to the extent that people were not aware of him taking pictures. He used this approach for “Wife and child of a sharecropper, Washington County.” Rothstein, as William Stott writes, “got someone from the region to go up to the woman and talk to her while, with his Leica, he stood unobtrusively in the background. . . . When she answered ‘with

11Development and Administration of Emergency Programs. Traveling Recovery Road: The Story of RELIEF, WORK-RELIEF and REHABILITATION in ARKANSAS, August 30, 1932 to November 1936 (Little Rock: State Emergency Relief Administration, 1936), 97-98.

12Tensions over the relative authority of the central offices of federal rehabilitation programs and the regional offices led to efforts at the state and county levels to play a larger role in public information. In early 1936, regional administrators proposed to create their own photographic divisions, which O. E. Jones, information adviser for Region VI (Arkansas’s region), carried out by distributing inexpensive cameras in the region. This did not likely affect Nicholson, who had probably already taken the photos considered here. Kidd, Farm Security Administration Photography, 37-40.

anxiety or concern, completely unaware of the camera,’ Rothstein stepped forward and snapped the picture. . . . ‘This method gave me what I wanted,’ he said, ‘a factual and true scene.’”

Ben Shahn is likely better known today as an artist than for his RA/FSA photographs, though he contributed some of the collection’s most outstanding images. He was a Lithuanian emigrant, trained as a painter, lithographer, and muralist and hired to create posters for federal relief projects during the Depression. On a three-month tour of the South and Southwest in 1935 sponsored by the Special Skills Division of the RA, he took hundreds of pictures as raw material for his posters and murals; Stryker later placed them in the FSA collection. Unlike later photographers for the project who were given detailed “shooting scripts” prepared by Stryker, Shahn did not embark on his tour with a specific photo assignment.

Shahn had “keenly felt moral sensibilities” that gave his art and his photography a definite point of view. He was an influential advisor to Stryker in the early, formative days of the project when Stryker was trying to define a visual approach for his goal of selling federal anti-poverty programs to the public. Shahn’s sense of the kind of photographs the project should produce was demonstrated in the advice he gave Stryker about a photo of soil erosion that he said would not have a strong impact on an audience. “Look Roy,” Shahn said, “you’re not going to move anybody with this eroded soil—but the effect this eroded soil has on a kid who looks starved, this is going to move people.”

Shahn’s intent was to use his photographs as visual research for his paintings and murals, and therefore to him his Leica was a “mechanical sketchpad.” He insisted his FSA pictures “weren’t just photographs to me; in a real sense they were the raw materials of painting.” In fact, elements from his photos can be found in some of his paintings from this period. His attitude about photographic technique has been described as “casual.”

16 The “shooting scripts” that Stryker prepared for photographers included background information on the area where they were traveling and detailed suggestions for photos. He developed this practice as the photography project evolved, and it is highly unlikely that Ben Shahn or Arthur Rothstein had such specific directions on their trips to Arkansas in 1935. Stu Cohen, The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration (Boston: David R. Godine, 2009), 153-154.
17 “Ben Shahn.”
images having the quality of sketches. One observer has written, “Some images have been framed in a loose or imprecise way, reflecting Shahn’s view of his photographs as instrumental and his belief that content was more important than form or technique.”

The Captions

The purpose and goal of the FSA photos are matters of record, but there is no documentation for any assignment given Nicholson. There are, however, extensive typewritten captions for almost all of his photographs. These captions—and there is nothing to confirm whether or not Nicholson was the author—can in some cases run to three paragraphs in length.

RA/FSA photographers were instructed to record identifying information about their photographs, but their captions tended to be more like labels; that is, the date of the photo and short phrases that gave the location and sometimes a brief note about the content. These label captions consisted of a few words, such as “Sharecropper’s cabin, Washington County, Arkansas” or “Son of rehabilitation client, Ozark Mountains” providing little information about the people in the photos. There is nothing to learn about their individual struggles except the details of clothing or housing apparent in the images.

In the labels for his northwestern Arkansas photos, Shahn used the word “destitute” over and over—for nearly a third of his photos. However, Shahn and Rothstein did not actually label most of their photos; if they took four or five shots of one subject, they would choose one of the photos to label, leaving the remaining ones untitled. Names of the subjects were occasionally given, but Will Counts subsequently found that many of these names were incorrect and some even apparently made up by Shahn and Rothstein. Counts speculated that they were perhaps respecting their subjects’ privacy. Instead of giving names of women and children, Shahn and Rothstein frequently identified them as “son of,” “wife of,” or simply “rehabilitation client.”

Compared to such scant information, the typewritten captions on Nicholson’s photos have the character of reports, with occasional more personal comments. By revealing details about the lives of those pictured, they extend the stories of the photographs beyond the picture frames. Out of Nicholson’s ninety-eight photos, nearly 80 percent have captions, the content of which can be grouped into a few categories that appear most frequently as topics. The topic included most often, in roughly one-fourth of the captions, is improvements that relief clients have made to their prop-

18Ibid.
19Counts, Photographic Legacy, 4-5, 32.
property or livelihood. Just slightly less often (23.4 percent), captions explain why a client is on relief, and 17 percent of captions describe the specific help given by the caseworker. Names of clients are used in nearly 60 percent of the captions, which might be expected of a report intended to document who is getting what kind of relief and how well they are progressing.

Mr. Ramey has put in windows and has the house well screened. The windows and screen wire was bought with the special disbursing order issue from the special fund for relief clients. (Figure 2)

He has turned his attention to milk goats. He is now milking 35 head. We are encouraging him in this new undertaking and buying a goat now and then for other clients who have babies and no milk. (Figure 3)

Captions note the problems that had overwhelmed clients, such as crop failures, debts, “married troubles,” “drouths,” depression, absence of public works, exhaustion of timber, and floods.

Frequently, judgment is passed on the children of the household and their future prospects:

These children who know no other life seem happy here but will of course become individulists \[sic\] and will hardly know how to adjust themselves to society when they get out into the world. (Figure 4)

These women have just quit hoeing corn and dressed up for this picture. . . . This child will probably follow in the steps of its mother and grandmother if left alone in these surroundings. It might be saved. (Figure 5)

Overall, the tone of the captions reflects concern for the clients, as in the case of the story of Aunt Vina Jones:

This is the cabin of Aunt Vina Jones. She is very ill with dropsy and will probably not live long. Her sister has come to try to help her by administering tea made of “Wahoo” roots. The other two women are daughter and grand-daughter of Mrs. Jones.
Even while this picture was being made the case worker could hear Mrs. Jones calling for her deceased husband to come and take her to their new home.

Let us hope that there may be some domestic reward awaiting for one who has worked faithfully for 50 years in a cabin like this. (Figure 6)

There are references to poetry and art and some wryly humorous observations that can betray a certain impatience with some clients:

This client had the attitude of the man who wouldn’t repair his roof in rainy weather because it was too wet and in dry weather because it didn’t leak then. The case worker has succeeded in getting him to rive some new boards and patch his roof and to clean up and repair his place in general. There is still room for improvement. (Figure 7)

The caption content and style support the possibility that the photos might be a report to a decision-making body. About 10 percent of the time, the writer addresses a reader or viewer and points out information, as in, “Their white dog, which you can see . . .” or “You can easily see . . . .” And there are references to providing clients with supplies: “The materials were acquired with almost no cost.”

The RA/FSA pictures, by contrast, were meant to become part of a photo bank of images that could be distributed to the media or used in posters or exhibits to encourage support for federal poverty relief programs, rather than simply document the workings of such programs. They were meant to be largely anonymous records of destitute southern farm families—the son of a rehabilitation client or the wife and child of a sharecropper. As such, personal details were not necessary. In any case, “outsider” photographers in their short visit could not develop a deep understanding of their subjects’ life and culture. The family shown in Figure 1 filed a libel suit after another photo Rothstein took of them was published in the Saturday Evening Post. They were aggrieved that Rothstein had labeled them sharecroppers, which they insisted was incorrect.

20These phrases are from captions listed here in order: “An Isolated Home” [S-95-181-59], “Home To Be Improved” [S-95-181-37], “Looking for Something Easy” [S-95-181-88], “Poultrymen” [S-95-181-96], McCoy Collection.

21Kidd, Farm Security Administration Photography, 138-145.
Nicholson, as a native of the area, had a better grasp of local circumstance. The captions for his photos suggest his intentions were more specifically targeted, addressing particular families. They identified his subjects by name and made observations, some highly personal, some critical. Thus, the captions are highly informative and, though fairly detached, can be somewhat judgmental about the people and their use of relief provided them. One said of a family originally from Franklin County: “They came to Newton County to get an easy living and had to come to the relief to get it. You can easily see the disappointed look in the faces of both father and son.”

Content

The two sets of photos show the same kinds of people living in similar circumstances, but with a discernible difference in tone and sensibility. In terms of content, several categories emerged as most significant: adults shown alone; children alone; adults and children together; people with houses; houses shown alone; people at work; and miscellaneous (mainly landscapes showing rugged terrain).

The most important category overall is people shown with their houses. This category represents more than half of the photos in each collection, 56 percent in Nicholson’s and 53 percent in the RA/FSA photos. In fact, photos with people are dominant in both collections—that includes more than 70 percent of Nicholson’s pictures and nearly 88 percent of the RA/FSA shots. In many of Nicholson’s photographs, families stand in front of their homes, with children arrayed in stair-step fashion, oldest to the youngest, and the baby held by a parent (Figure 8). Many of the adults pictured in both collections seem to be about the same age, perhaps in their thirties. But subjects range in age from the very young to the very old. In the caption for one Nicholson photo, a couple is described as having been married for sixty-two years. All three photographers emphasized families over people living alone.

Although Nicholson included a slightly higher percentage of photos of houses shown alone, both collections show houses ranging from poor shacks with sway-backed roofs to more substantial structures. Shahn especially noted details of the structure of houses. In one photo, he focuses on the gaps between mismatched boards of an exterior wall (Figure 9). Nicholson’s photos (and some of his captions) refer to missing doors in doorways or plans to cover windows that are boarded up. Almost all the photos have been taken outside. This approach is certainly more respectful of people’s privacy but could also have been a consequence of using cameras not capable of shooting in low light, indoor conditions.

22“Looking for Something Easy.”
Both collections seem to focus on making clear the abject poverty of their subjects and the desperation of their living conditions. The photographs show explicitly the lack of physical comforts and suggest that people are using whatever is at hand to survive. Photos seem to have been framed to catch the details of over-worn, ill-fitting clothing. Younger children rarely wear shoes, women wear loose dresses and aprons, men wear overalls and almost always have on hats. On the whole, there is little difference in the content of the two sets of photographs; both are absorbed with documenting certain details about the lives of their subjects.

**Formal qualities: composition and other visual techniques**

Composition, lighting, camera angle, camera-subject distance, interaction between photographer and subject—these are all expressive visual techniques that photographers can manipulate to draw attention to certain objects and suggest how they should be seen and understood. More experienced photographers will be more adept in using these techniques. However, the simple, straightforward approach of an amateur photographer with a specific goal in mind can be as effective in telling a story, sometimes through its very lack of artifice.

The visual techniques of these photographers relied most heavily on composition, camera-subject distance, and interaction between photographer and subject. Shahn and Rothstein varied camera angles more often, but most of the shots in both collections relied on the same straightforward approach. Lighting effects were minimal.

Ernest Nicholson’s approach in photographing his subjects was simple and consistent. More than three-quarters of the photos were composed with the subject fixed at the center of the picture frame. In 83 percent, the subject was roughly thirty to forty feet from the camera, and in more than 90 percent no special camera angle (from above or below the subject) was used. Nicholson took no close-ups at all. Judging from the camera angle, almost all subjects were shot from the same perspective—a camera held at approximately waist level. In nearly 60 percent of the pictures, subjects posed, looking directly at the camera, involved in the process but rarely smiling. A woman in one photograph seems to be folding her hands in her lap with a hint of a smile (Figure 5). According to the caption, “These women have just quit hoeing corn and dressed up for this picture.” This kind of repetition in content—people and houses—and presentation—a static formal composition—suggest the photographer’s goal was to create a consistently recorded document of living conditions. Moreover, the subjects were aware of the picture-taking process and even participating in it.

Ben Shahn and Arthur Rothstein, by contrast, rely heavily on candid shots in which the subjects are caught off-guard. In fact, in more
than three-fourths of the photos, the subjects seem unaware of the camera, and are looking in another direction. The photographer is completely in control of the situation, waiting for just the right moment to press the shutter, to capture the photo for the “story” he wants. With such candid unposed portraits Rothstein and Shahn may have intended to capture character and the effects of suffering on the faces of these families. These candid shots also give a sense of movement to the photos, as people are often caught in a gesture. Both RA/FSA photographers also used a technique of framing a subject in the darkness of an open doorway, using the contrast between the figure and the dim interior to create a dramatic emphasis on the person (Figures 10 and 11).

Though about half of the RA/FSA shots centered the subject in the picture frame, nearly 40 percent placed the subject just off center, a deliberately artful device that catches a reader’s eye. It is unusual and non-journalistic, and it conveys a feeling of action. Composition attracts the reader perhaps as much as content. Almost 70 percent of the pictures were taken from a distance of perhaps six to fifteen feet, not an intimate distance but close enough to be regarded as “familiar.” Rothstein and Shahn both took a few shots from a distance of about four feet. Shooting close-ups can be challenging for a photographer because it verges on an invasion of the subject’s private space and can be uncomfortable for both photographer and subject. Subjects might sense they are being put on display to an unknown audience that may judge them.

Rothstein and Shahn’s use of these visual techniques suggests they were deliberately looking for a certain kind of photo. As Rothstein said of his tactic of using a local person to distract the subject, “This method gave me what I wanted.”23 These photos, as Shahn had recommended to Stryker, were intended to move people. Nicholson was certainly deliberate in his photos as well, however. His goal was apparently to capture certain details that would be important to document the amount of progress that rehabilitation clients had made. The difference is that his photographic approach was unschooled, which can lead a reader to assume there is less of an attempt to manipulate the image. The photo might seem more truthful, though the caption makes more explicit what Nicholson wants people to think about the subject.

Camera equipment

The cameras used by these photographers were important as well, because of the great differences in the capabilities of photo equipment in the first half of the twentieth century, and therefore in the nature of the

23Stott, Documentary Expression, 61.
photographs produced. Naomi Rosenblum divides the developing camera technologies of the late 1800s through the 1930s and 1940s into two streams—the cheap, simple Kodak created by George Eastman for amateur photographers, and cameras such as the Leica designed for the serious photographer who wanted more control over the shot.  

Rothstein and Shahn both used Leicas. Although it is not known what camera Nicholson used, it is very likely to have been a Kodak Brownie No. 2. Manufactured between 1907 and 1936, with more than 1.2 million produced before 1921, the Brownie No. 2 was not only widely available but cheap at an original price of $3. The dimensions of the Nicholson photos are exactly those produced by the No. 2A, 2½ x 4¼ inches.

Leicas came on the market in 1925. Their portability, small size, and user controls changed photojournalism as well as expressive photography, according to Rosenblum:

> Easy to handle, with a fast lens and rapid film-advancement mechanism, the Leica called forth intuitive rather than considered responses and permitted its users to make split-second decisions about exposure and framing, which often imbued the image with a powerful sense of being a slice-of-life excised from a seamless actuality.

Leica’s photo mechanics meant a photographer could frame up a shot accurately by lifting the camera to his eye and composing it through the viewfinder. Fast shutter speeds meant he could stop action to capture a gesture and shoot under varying light conditions. The quiet shutter meant he could snap a picture without the subject being aware. With control of the focusing mechanism, he could take close-ups as well as long shots. In addition, the Leica used roll film with thirty-six frames, which meant a photographer could take several shots of a scene.

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The photos of Rosenblum and Shahn show they took advantage of all these features. Both photographers utilized the fast shutter speed to shoot candid pictures, to stop action, and to catch a spontaneous movement or facial expression. They were able to maneuver around a scene easily and shoot from different angles and distances. They both used close-ups of the faces of their subjects. The Leica’s precision framing meant they could accurately compose a shot to achieve more artistic images. Clearly, the Leica gave Rothstein and Shahn the control they needed to get the kind of photographs they wanted. Their pictures are less a collaboration between photographer and subject than an expression of the photographer’s intent.

Nicholson’s photographs have different visual qualities that can be ascribed to his using a more limited kind of camera. The Kodak box camera, introduced in 1888, was wildly popular in Europe and the U.S. It appealed to amateur photographers because it was portable and simple to use. Kodak’s slogan, in fact, was “You press the button and we do the rest.” Simplicity of use meant limitations on the photos the camera could produce. In fact, as Naomi Rosenblum writes, the Kodak imposed more control over the pictures than photographers could.

Kodaks had a fixed focus mechanism that meant the photographer’s subject had to be positioned at a certain distance in order to get a sharp image. The fixed shutter speed limited the light conditions for shooting and also meant that subjects had to hold still for the picture. Kodak instruction manuals advised photographers to hold their breath when pressing the button to avoid camera shake. To advance the film, the photographer had to use a manual winder on the camera. Since a roll of film might have only eight frames, the photographer would likely take only one shot of a scene. To frame a shot, the photographer had to hold the camera at about waist level and look down into the viewfinder located on the top. Since the camera’s framing was not accurate, anything around the edge of the frame might not make it onto the film. This could lead photographers to compose pictures with subjects in the center of the image, just to be safe.

29 A particularly good example of Ben Shahn’s close-up shots is “One of few remaining inhabitants of Zinc, Arkansas,” [LC-USF33-006036-M4]. One of Arthur Rothstein’s few close-ups from this area is “Wife of rehabilitation client, Washington County,” (LC-USF33-002019-M3). Both are found at the site America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, American Memory, Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html.


31 Rosenblum, World History, 260, 446-447.

The Nicholson photos show evidence of the kind of shots Kodak could produce. As described earlier, Nicholson’s subjects almost always appear as if posed, looking directly at the camera and seemingly waiting for the shutter to be snapped. The images are static; people “hold still” for the photographer. The major subject of the photos is almost always in the center of the image. Subjects appear at least fifteen feet away, many are even farther from the camera. This approach apparently worked for Nicholson. It suited his purposes of showing family members in the context of their environment—their houses, yards, and features of the rural setting. The formality of the posing and composition of these pictures suggest everyone, subjects as well as photographers, was working together to get one shot, with little danger of subjects feeling their privacy had been invaded. With only eight frames per roll, it is likely all involved would have recognized the need for economy.

Both the FSA and the Nicholson photos were intended to create a visual record of destitute Ozark farmers in order to shape opinion about the welfare of Americans—and Arkansans—suffering extreme poverty. But the RA/FSA photos were targeted at American taxpayers, whereas Nicholson’s photos were probably produced for local officials who made decisions about relief support for specific individuals.

Both of these collections include remarkable images. The RA/FSA photographs may be particularly striking through their artistry, whereas Nicholson’s photos are arresting for their seeming lack of it. Even three-quarters of a century later, these photographs can move us. Each generation that rediscovers the FSA photographs of the 1930s reacts strongly to them. The pictures project a sense of truthfulness about the hard times because they feel so raw. Though some commentators have criticized the RA and FSA as producing “propaganda” for President Franklin Roosevelt’s programs and photographers such as Rothstein for manipulating subjects, the dirt-poor destitution of the people was still a painful fact and the photos document that.

Nicholson’s photographs along with their captions are just as evocative. That women who had been hoeing a garden would clean up to pose for a photo, sitting on the porch of a ramshackle house, tugs at our own twenty-first century concern for the appearance of propriety. Viewers might find themselves measuring the gap between their own lives and the kind of existence shown in both collections. Their power lies in what they record—the poignancy of hopeless situations and the people caught in them, and the reality that things can go very wrong.

Photographs and captions credited to Arthur Rothstein and Ben Shahn can be accessed at the Library of Congress website American Memory, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black-and-White Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945, at memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahome.html.
A CLIENTS NEW HOME

New home of Frank Ramey. Since picture was made, Mr. Ramey has put in windows and has the house well screened. The windows and screen wire was bought with the special disbursing order issued from the special fund for relief clients.

Figure 2. Mrs. Frank Ramey with her children, Newton County. Courtesy Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Katy McCoy Collection [S-95-181-30].
This client came here from Illinois 2 years ago. He was sold on the Ozarks by a real estate dealer and paid about $2000 for a place of uncertain value. He did not know how to farm here and soon spent all his money and energy with no return.

There is an inexhaustible supply of kaolin on his place which we may be able to find some value in. He has turned his attention to milk goats. He is now milking 35 head. We are encouraging him in this new undertaking and buying a goat from him now and then for other clients who may have babies and no milk. We believe this may be valuable to other clients.

Figure 3. The James Newby family, Newton County. *Courtesy Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Katy McCoy Collection [S-95-181-9]*.
There are eight living in this small house. The house is located on a high mountain overlooking the Red Rock Valley from another view. The only way [of] getting to this house is to walk about one mile. The only amusement the small children have is playing with their white dog, which you can see at the corner of the building. These children who know no other life seem happy here but will of course become individualists [sic] and will hardly know how to adjust themselves to society when they get out in the world. The case workers [sic] is hoping to help this situation with reading material, etc. It is a challenging opportunity.

Figure 4. Unidentified family near Red Rock Valley, Newton County. Courtesy Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Katy McCoy Collection [S-95-181-59].
HARD WORKING WOMEN

These women have just quit hoeing corn and dressed up for this picture. They make their living by working in the fields. This child will probably follow in the steps of its mother and grandmother if left alone in these surroundings. It might be saved.

Figure 5. From left (probably): Ellen Weaver, Tilda Weaver, and Murt Weaver, Newton County. Courtesy Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Katy McCoy Collection [S-95-181-93].
HOME OVER THERE

This is the cabin of Aunt Vina Jones. She is very ill with dropsy and will probably not live long. Her sister has come to try to help her by administering tea made of “Wahoo” roots. The other two women are daughter and grand-daughter of Mrs. Jones.

Even while this picture was being made the case worker could hear Mrs. Jones calling for her deceased husband to come and take her to their new home.

Let us hope that there may be some domestic reward awaiting for one who has worked faithfully for 50 years in a cabin like this.

Figure 6. Women at Vina Jones home, Newton County. Courtesy Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Katy McCoy Collection [S-95-181-5].
“WHEN IT DON’T RAIN IT DON’T LEAK”

This client had the attitude of the man who wouldn’t repair his roof in rainy weather because it was too wet and in dry weather because it didn’t leak then. The case worker has succeeded in getting him to rive some new boards and patch his roof and to clean up and repair his place in general. There is still room for improvement.

Figure 7. Unidentified home, Newton County. Courtesy Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Katy McCoy Collection [S-95-181-43].
With nothing but a single hoe, these courageous women have made a crop. Mrs. Treadway and her mother live alone with the three small children.

Two other children were killed not long ago in a school bus wreck.

Figure 8. Mrs. Treadway (left) with her children and her mother, Newton County. Courtesy Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Katy McCoy Collection [S-95-181-48].
Figure 9. Outer wall detail, home of destitute mountaineer, Ozark Mountains, Arkansas. Ben Shahn, October 1935. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF33-006066-M4 DLC].
Figure 10. Boone County, Arkansas. The family of a Resettlement Administration client in the doorway of their home. Ben Shahn, October 1935. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF33-006035-M4].
Figure 11. Rehabilitation client, Boone County, Arkansas. Ben Shahn, October 1935. *Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF33-006033-M4]*.
Figure 12. Citizens from Zinc, Arkansas, a deserted mining town. Ben Shahn, October 1935. *Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [LC-USF33-006036-M5].*